

9

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KUROGIN (DIGS)

BLACK SUMMONER

THE TRUE CHAMPION



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DOZENS OF EXPLOSIONS WERE GOING OFF IN QUICK SUCCESSION, EVERY LAST ONE MORE POWERFUL THAN AN ERUPTION. EACH TIME THE FLAME DRAGON KING SPAT HIS CRIMSON BREATH, EFIL SHOT IT DOWN WITH A CRIMSON ARROW, HER UNERRING ACCURACY TRIGGERING THE BLASTS IN MIDAIR. BECAUSE THE PROJECTILES COMING FROM BOTH SIDES WERE PACKED WITH FIRE CONCENTRATED TO THE EXTREME, EACH OF THEIR COLLISIONS EASILY SURPASSED A VOLCANIC ERUPTION IN INTENSITY.

FLAME DRAGON KING

EFIL



"OH, ARE YOU CURIOUS ABOUT THIS FORM OF MINE? HEH HEH HEH, NOW I LOOK JUST LIKE ONE OF OUR TRUSTED ALLIES, THE MERMAIDS. THIS IS ANOTHER APPLICATION OF THE POWER MY LORD IS GIVING ME."

TSUBAKI

"YOU CAN SPEAK EVEN WHILE UNDERWATER? HOW FASCINATING."

SYLVIA

EMA

BLACK SUMMONER

Characters



Kelvin Celsius

Summoner who gained powerful skills in exchange for memories of his past life while transmigrating from Japan. Constantly seeking battle with powerful foes.
Alias: Grim Reaper

Kelvin's Companions



Efil

A half-elf girl purchased by Kelvin as a slave. The perfect maid. Loves her master deeply.



Sera

A beautiful demon in Kelvin's service. Daughter of the previous Demon Lord. Ignorant and knowledgeable in equal measure.



Rion Celsius

A hero summoned by Kelvin who became his half-sister. Has a rather skewed view of what it means to be a little sister.



Clotho

The first monster Kelvin ever took on as a Follower. Its Storage and ability to create materials make it a key player!



Melfina

Goddess of Reincarnation (currently on leave). Refers to herself as Kelvin's wife. Eats a lot.



Ellie

A maid in Kelvin's house who applied for the job in order to repay him for rescuing her and her daughter, Ruka.



Ruka

An apprentice maid in Kelvin's house. Full of energy. Loved by the whole neighborhood. Quite good at fighting.



Gerard

The dark knight who serves Kelvin. Dotes on Ruka and Rion as if they're his own grandchildren.



Alex

Kelvin's huge shadow wolf Follower. Rion's partner. Gets a thorough brushing every day.



Shutola Trycen

Trycen's princess. Currently freeloading at Kelvin's place. Every day is a blast!



Ange

Former Apostle. Now happily enslaved to Kelvin.

The Holy Empire of Deramis

A country that worships the Goddess of Reincarnation. Headed by the Pope. Connected to the Rizean Empire on the Western Continent through Crux Bridge, but is at odds with them.



Colette
Oracle of Deramis. Summoned the Heroes. Her fanaticism makes her a bit sick in the head.



Kanzaki Touya
A Hero summoned from Japan. Lucky pervert. Dual wields. Very oblivious to signs of affection.



Shiga Setsuna
A Hero summoned from Japan. Serious and diligent. Cleans up the problems that Touya causes.



Mizuoka Nana
A Hero summoned from Japan. Partnered with Mun-chan, a flame dragon. Has a comforting aura.



Kuromiya Miyabi
A Hero summoned from Japan. One quarter Russian. Her thoughts are a complete mystery.

The Apostles of Elearis

An organization that worships Elearis as the Goddess of Reincarnation and schemes to resurrect her and bring her back to this world.

The First Seat: Arbitrator
Real name is Iris Deramilius.
Elearis's proxy. Resurrects those she thinks would be useful as Apostles.

The Second Seat: Selector
Real name is unknown.
Only Arbitrator knows his location, but even this info is uncertain.

The Third Seat: Creator
Real name is Jildora.
Possesses the Unique Skill Eternal Return. Has a deep history with Gerard.

The Fourth Seat: Protector
Real name is Serge Flore.
The previous Hero. Defeated Demon Lord Gustau. Possesses the Unique Skill Absolute Gospel.

The Fifth Seat: Analyzer
Real name is Riold.
The real identity of former guildmaster Rio. Possesses the Unique Skill God's Eye.

The Sixth Seat: Condemner
Real name is Bell Baal.
Possesses the Unique Skill Color Corrosion, which allows her to manipulate the intensity of attributes of those she touches.

The Seventh Seat: Reviver
Real name is Estoria Kranweltz.
Fought with Kelvin's group in Deramis and lost.

The Eight Seat: Empty
This is the Seat previously occupied by Ange. No one has assumed it since she left the organization to join Kelvin's group.

The Ninth Seat: Survivor
Real name is unknown.
The swordsman who fought Rion in the Beast King Festival. Possesses a powerful ability to survive no matter what.

The Tenth Seat: Empty
This Seat was empty when Ange was a part of the Apostles.

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ILLUSTRATOR: DAIXT, KUROGIN (DIGS)

Chapter 1: Pinnacle

Serge giggled. It wasn't a sarcastic or snide giggle, but one accompanied by a smile that showed she actually thought the situation was funny. Her height and appearance seemed to match Rion's, but the way she was sitting at the edge of the altar and dangling her legs made her seem even younger.



Even so, Ange did not let down her guard. She stared at the white swordswoman so hard, it was as if she was afraid she would lose sight of her if she looked away for a split second. At the same time, Rion quickly reached out to Melfina through telepathy.

::Mel-nee, are you okay?!::

::I'm...fine. I managed to avoid taking fatal attacks. However, this opponent is no joke.:: Melfina got back on her feet, leaning on her lance for support. Although she had managed to heal herself with White Magic, there was no way to restore her armor. It was thoroughly beaten up, even being completely ruined in some parts.

"Finishing...your mission? What do you mean?!" Ange demanded.

"Exactly as it sounds. I no longer have to protect the Cradle anymore. You know, Arbitrator's sanctum. You know what that means, don't you, Assassin?"

"But that..."

The only inference to draw was that Elearis, the goddess the Apostles served, had already been resurrected. Ange swallowed her words back down even as she discerned what Serge's presence here meant. And the answer did not bode well for Ange and her companions.

"Be...careful..." Estoria murmured from where she was lying motionless on the ground.

Ange shot her a look. "What, you have advice for us?" she asked, still wary of the vampire.

Unfortunately, the feelings were mutual. "I was only...talking to...Gerard-sama..."

::Everyone, be on high alert. This is the Fourth Seat, Serge Flore. She's the previous Hero, the one who defeated Demon Lord Gustav, Sera-san's father. And I'm pretty sure she's *the* most powerful fighter in the world. She's the pinnacle of combat skill,:: Ange warned everyone through the Network, making sure to emphasize just how formidable their opponent was.

::In the *entire* world?: Rion asked incredulously. ::Like, better than Mel-nee

and Prettia-chan?::

::At the very least, there's no doubt she's the most powerful among the Apostles,:: Ange confirmed. ::What's more, Gerard-san and I are worn out now, and Melfina-san, who's the strongest among us, is, well...::

Melfina sighed. ::To be honest, I didn't stand a chance. I couldn't make her move an inch from where she's sitting.::

It only took Melfina a split second to upload the footage of her battle with Serge to the Network. Rion and the others immediately played the video, which began just as Melfina had saved Sister Atra. After using her Holy Lance to make short work of the lich king possessing the unconscious nun lying on the altar, she headed over to heal her up. However, the moment she was done removing all the hexes, when there was nothing left to do but wait for Atra to wake up, a voice rang out.

“Excuse me there, Melfina, Goddess of Reincarnation.”

Serge appeared with a casual greeting, sitting exactly where she currently was—in other words, on the edge of the altar. Until the moment she spoke up, Melfina had not noticed her presence.

“Wha—?!”

In the blink of an eye, Melfina found herself thrown back. Or at least, she thought she did, although the truth was that the goddess had backed up herself. At this moment in time, however, Melfina had yet to realize it.

After that, Melfina spammed a plethora of Blue Magic spells at the Hero, including the attack that had finished off Demon Lord Zel: Luminary Burst. At first, she held back out of concern over getting Sister Atra caught up in the cross fire, but that discretion soon faded away. After all, nothing she threw at Serge landed. Even when she manipulated Celsius Briar, it only took Serge one swing of her sword to smash it to pieces. The rays of light sparkling like stars in the sky all curved when approaching the Hero, eventually shattering against the wall behind her back, their energy sapped. Melfina tried a few more things, but none of them worked on Serge either. She couldn't even make the girl get up.

Furthermore, the more Melfina attacked, the more she herself got hurt. For

example, the icicles created when Serge parried the briars just happened to topple the remains of a stone pillar nearby that fell her way. Sometimes, Melfina's own spells exploded in her face. The severity of what was happening was on a whole other level, but the nature of the clash bore a great resemblance to the phenomenon seen during Touya's fight with Ellie and Ruka. And that was where the footage ended.

::As I'm sure you've already realized, Serge possesses Absolute Gospel just like Touya does, although the luck it gives her is much, much more powerful,:: Melfina concluded.

::Hmm, that does seem like a pain to handle,:: Gerard noted.

::Even though I'd expected it based on what Ange-san told us before, I never imagined I'd be this outclassed....::

::Melfina-san, being able to make Protector draw her sword is already a great feat in and of itself. The only way to land attacks on her is when there's literally no way for those attacks to miss. If there's even the slightest chance of error, her luck will undoubtedly make it happen. In other words, single-point attacks don't work but large-area ones do. Either that, or have someone on our side whose Luck stat is even higher than hers.::

::Have you fought her before, An-nee?::

::Nope, never had the opportunity. She told me all this herself. When she's bored, she tends to blab about a lot of things.::

It was not so much that Protector was arrogant as she didn't really mind anyone knowing. Then again, there was a part of her that was simply a chatterbox who didn't sweat the small stuff, but it was only because she had a mountain of achievements that she had developed such a personality. There wasn't much anyone could do even knowing how her power worked—that was how powerful the being known as "Protector" Serge Flore was. These were all details that would make a certain someone shed tears of joy if he heard them.

"Aww, you don't have to be *that* on guard against me. I didn't come here to fight; I just wanted to have a little chat. As for what happened with Goddess Melfina...uh, yep, I was just protecting myself!" Serge raised a thumb and an index finger and thrust them forward as if to indicate that she had thought of a

good idea.

“A chat, you say?” Ange asked guardedly.

“Yep, yep! It’s actually one of my goals in coming here. You know, Assassin, since you left, the only Apostles that I can talk to are Survivor and Condemner. I don’t really like the new guy, Controller, all that much, and Arbitrator seems kinda on edge these days. So yeah, since I’m now free and it’s been a while, I decided to come see how you’re doing. And look at you! You’ve gotten strong enough to defeat Reviver! And you seem to have made new friends and all, so I’m pretty happy for you. Yep! Oh, by the way, you okay there, Reviver?”

Almost not even giving herself time to breathe, Serge continued chattering, vigorously gesturing with her hands. She didn’t seem to care that she was dropping pretty important-sounding information, simply going on and on with as much enthusiasm as expected when catching up with an old friend. One would find her mannerisms entirely reasonable in light of her immature appearance if not for the circumstances of the current situation.

“By the way, I heard you got a boyfriend, Assassin! Lemme meet him sometime! And that cute girl over there, are you also Japanese? Oh, what am I saying? Of course you are. Tell me, which prefecture are you from? I’m from...”

Everyone was struck speechless, but Serge went on with zero regard for the mood. She filled the air with her cheerful voice, her eyes glittering with enjoyment.

::Um, An-nee...are you sure this is the most powerful person in the world?::

::I...think so, at least. Maybe?::

Even Ange was starting to doubt herself. However, this was possibly a strategy to make all of them lower their guard. If so, then Serge was really crafty. The group reevaluated their impression of her accordingly.

Rion spoke up. “Excuse me, miss.”

“Call me Fuu-chan or Secchan!”

“Ah, I already know a Secchan, so Fuu-chan it is, then.”

“My name doubles with someone else’s?!”

The likelihood that Serge was purposely being guileful was very low. Somehow, Shiga Setsuna, the Hero Rion had already referred to as “Secchan,” had managed to deal damage to the most powerful fighter in the world without even meaning to.

“If ‘one’ of your goals was to see An-nee again, it means you have other ones, right? What’s the second?”

“Hey, pretty smart of you to catch on! This is my second goal.” Serge reached over and gave Atra’s hair a few gentle strokes. “I’m here to retrieve Holy Lance Eclipse, just in case. I guess it’s, like, insurance for Reviver? If I forget to bring it back, Arbitrator’s gonna get really mad at me.”

“That’s—”

Just as Rion was about to reply, Ange stopped her through telepathy.

::Rion-chan, it’s about time::

::Oh! Okay, gotcha::

For a split second, Rion directed her attention to the staircase at her back and picked up on two powerful presences rushing down it at incredible speed. When she checked the Network, it became clear who it was.

“Triple Air Pressure!”

“Direct Blue Fulmination Rain!”

One was a hopeless battle junkie drawn by the mention of “the most powerful fighter in the world,” and one was the bomber maid in love with said battle junkie.

There was no better way to describe what happened next than “a volcano exploding with blue lava.” Efil, the figure in a maid uniform, leaped into the air and unleashed a move from her bow of hellish fire, Penumbra, that she had once used in the Grand Scarlet Canyon. However, there were two changes between then and now.

Back then, she had shot one crimson arrow into the sky, and the arrow had scattered into countless sparks that exploded upon impact, causing the Trycenian knights and dragons of the Dragon Knight Order much grief and pain.

This time, however, the term “direct” in the name of the move indicated that it was actually a rain of arrows falling instead of mere sparks. The destructive power was on a whole other level, bringing a seemingly endless chain of devastation. The barrage of explosive sounds also meant that even allies near the point of impact had to be careful.

The second change was that she was now using her Unique Skill, Blue Flames, to increase the potency of all her fire-based attacks. Direct Fulmination Rain was already enough to change an area’s topography by thoroughly destroying all visible ground—Direct Blue Fulmination Rain was nothing more than a nightmare for opponents. Even if someone possessed a resistance to fire elemental attacks, it meant nothing. This area was now such a dangerous place to be that even monsters that normally lived in lava would burn to death.

::Master!::

Yep! Don’t stop! We’re getting a bite at every cast today!

At the same time that blue flames converted the battlefield into a scene from hell, Kelvin, who had also leaped into the air, cast his own spell. At three times its usual output, Triple Air Pressure had turned from a spell meant to restrain a target to one meant to instantaneously squish it. As it applied to a large area, the spell had no blind spot, granting death equally to all within range.

Unfortunately, Sister Atra was still there where Kelvin and Efil were attacking.

“Hey, hey, hey! I came here because of Ange’s message, but it looks like there’s still an ancient Hero left! It sure isn’t like you to lie to me, Melfina!”

Unable to hide his delight, Kelvin could not help the end of his sentences rising in inflection. His glee clearly came from the bottom of his heart.

::Honey, I was talking about... Actually, I meant this as a surprise for you! I thought you’d like it!::

Seriously?!

On the spur of the moment, Melfina decided to take advantage of the situation. This was one shrewd goddess.

Even while this comedic exchange was taking place, the carpet bombing and

death-dealing pressure was still going on. Only when Efil's MP started running out did she finally let up her attack.

Funnily, when someone witnesses someone else cutting loose too much, they themselves end up calming down. The sight of the sheer destruction that Efil was wreaking helped Rion and Ange remember that Sister Atra was still next to Serge. They broke out in a cold sweat.

"Hold on, hold on! I know I can take it, but the nun is still with me! Are you insane?!"

With a complaint that seemed a lot more reasonable than one would expect from her, Serge burst from the black explosive smoke with Atra under her arm. It was apparently impossible for even this Hero, said to be the world's strongest person, to weather the squall of destruction entirely unscathed, judging by the charred spots on her otherwise white outfit. It was indeed surprising that she had gotten off with so little damage, but what Rion and the rest felt was more relief at seeing Atra unharmed.

::Master, I saw several shields appear within the flames just now. I believe they are how Serge managed to survive.::

Might be another power of hers. She did point at Sister Atra and say she was retrieving her, so I figured she'd be playing defense. Turns out she took even less damage than I expected, ha ha!

While Efil took advantage of the situation to down an MP potion, Kelvin grinned widely. He was in a rather excited state, likely due to the elation he felt from the fight with the Light Dragon King still carrying over.

"This is our first time meeting, I believe. Nice to meet you, Serge Flore. Just leave the hostage. Fight me."

"Um, are you the kind of person who just ignores everything that other people say? This might sound strange coming from me, considering how pure I am, but Assassin, you really should choose your boyfriends more carefully."

"Uh...he's usually calmer than this."

The phrase "pinnacle of combat skill" had been the perfect trigger that made Kelvin go berserk, but there was no way Ange would admit it to Serge. Even

when she was still an Apostle, she had not fully described how much of a battle junkie Kelvin was in her reports.

“Ah, so this really is your boyfriend? I’d love to give you my blessing, but...”

“Don’t look at me like that!” The realization that she’d just dug her own grave and the pitying look she received left Ange in a fluster.

Serge turned to Kelvin. “Also, you called this nun a hostage, but that’s not quite right. She’s one of my goals. I can’t very well leave her behind, no matter what you say.”

“Okay, fight me while holding her, then.”

“Assassin, seriously...”

“I said, don’t look at me like that!” Ange wailed, her cheeks on fire.

“I mean, I don’t really mind fighting, but not today. As I said at the start, I’m not here to fight today. I came to meet Assassin and to retrieve this girl. That’s all. Oh wait, I had one more goal. ‘Grim Reaper’ Kelvin Celsius.”

“What? You finally feel like having a go?”

“No, that’s not it. Kelvin Celsius, I invite you to our base of operations. That said, I’m not giving you a ticket, and you’ll have to find the place yourself. If you manage to get in, I promise I’ll fight you. As much as you want, of course. Here’s a hint: it’s somewhere in Abyssland, the land of the demons. That’s where Arbitrator’s sanctum is. Ha ha, pretty ironic that the headquarters of a goddess’s apostles is in the land of demons, right? Anyway, whatever. Goddess of Reincarnation, Melfina, we very much want you to come too.”

“Me?”

“That’s the message Arbitrator told me to pass along. You’ll have to ask Reviver for the details. Okay, that’s all three goals accomplished!” After nodding a few times in satisfaction, Serge turned to Estoria, who was still on the ground. “Reviver, I’m afraid it’d be pretty difficult for me to carry two people out of here. Not that it’s impossible, but I really need to ensure that I bring this girl back, so...I guess I’m leaving you behind.”

“I understand. I’ll live my own life going forward.”

“Mh-hm, you’re now free to live however you want. However, I will have to take back Uprising, the gift that Arbitrator gave you when bringing you back.”

“That’s...a pity.” The vampire’s body glowed for a brief moment.

“Okay! That’s all from me!” As her business was finished, Serge immediately turned around and adjusted her hold on Sister Atra. However, she found Kelvin and his companions standing in front of the staircase that led out of the room.

“And how’re you planning on leaving this place when the staircase is behind us?”

“You *really* are itching for a fight, aren’t you? But y’know, that’s not the only path out of here.”

“What?”

Everyone present immediately looked up as Serge took a huge leap. Efil even loosed an arrow, but unfortunately, it was to no avail.

“There’s this other way made by the nice knight over there in the cool black armor! When I’m focusing a hundred percent on running away, I’m pretty strong!”

Serge was heading towards the gash in the ceiling left behind by Gerard’s Skyfall earlier. It bored straight to the upper floors, and there was no mark standing in front of it.

::Uh...my king, did I mess up?::

The smile rapidly left Kelvin’s face as he stared at Serge’s receding form. It couldn’t be clearer that he was losing his enthusiasm.

Nah, it helped me calm back down. I’m gonna contact Sera, then we’re giving chase. As for that Apostle over there...



It’s...dark. My head feels foggy, like I’m waking up after a long sleep. Did I fall asleep? Um, Old Lady Marigan told me to go buy supplies, so I had no choice but to go. When I got back to the orphanage, Ria was setting the table for lunch. Ughhh, I can’t remember what happened after lunch. Did I take a nap? Uh, I don’t think I’m that slovenly. Who am I, Ria? I’m drawing a blank.

I should open my eyes. Ughhh...my eyelids feel heavy. This is... Where is this? There's barely any light. It's about as dark as a room with the curtains drawn. Whoa, wait, am I on the move?

The person who slowly regained consciousness was none other than Sister Atra. She found herself in midflight, held in "Protector" Serge Flore's arms.

"Where *are* we?!" she shouted with every fiber of her being. The scenery whizzing by threw her into confusion as she felt herself moving at the speed of wind. Understandably, she was bewildered by the situation she had woken up to, but she immediately heard a beautiful voice speaking close to her ear.

"Hey there, good morning. Did I wake you up? This is pretty bumpy, after all."

"Who're *you*?!"

"Aha ha, glad to see you full of energy. Looks like Melfina did a good job healing you. Good on her."

Atra had no recollection of this black-haired girl who was chortling so cheerfully. Her smile was so alluring that, despite being of the same gender, Atra thought she would fall for the girl. That said, the stranger had not answered her question. And that attitude seemed to rub Atra, who was exactly the right age to be a rebellious teenager, the wrong way.

"Let me go! Let me go right now! I didn't give you permission to hug me!"

"Okay, okay, stop struggling. Do you want me to drop you among all the monsters?"

"Our orphanage is too poor to pay a ransom even if you kidnap me!"

Atra put up a fight as best she could to slip out of Serge's grasp, but the other girl's arms did not budge an inch. It was as if she were being held in an iron vise. No matter how hard she struggled, all she managed to do was make herself run out of breath.

"*Huff, huff.* Seriously, who *are* you?"

"Me? Hmm...I mean, I don't mind naming myself, but no one ever believes me."

"Don't give me that; just tell me. How else am I supposed to know what to call

you? Whoa, what was that?!”

Serge had just swung her arm to parry an attack by a passing monster, but Atra couldn’t properly comprehend what had happened.

“Oh, all right, since you asked. I’m Serge Flore.”

“You...what?”

“As I said, I’m Serge Flore.”

“If you’re gonna use a fake name, at least put a little thought into it. That’s the name of the previous Hero. Even I know that.”

Atra gave Serge a look of pity and sympathy. However, Serge was used to getting this reaction and simply laughed it off.

“I know, right? Well, just call me Fuu-chan or Secchan. Whichever you like.”

Still running, Serge pulled out her Holy Sword and struck a hero-like pose. She was being generous with the fanservice, but Atra continued looking at her reproachfully.

CLANG!

The sword that Serge had lifted to strike her pose with happened to parry a strike from Vicious Sword Carnage at that very instant, sending a metallic note ringing out. The person holding the lethally poisonous blade turned out to be Ange, with her cat-eared hood pulled forward.

“AHHHHHH!” Atra screamed in fright at the sudden appearance of the assassin with a daring grin.

“Aha! I guess a surprise attack on you wouldn’t land so easily!”

“Your surprise attacks are really bad for the heart, Assassin.”

In spite of her words, Serge did not look startled. She took the fact that she had parried Ange’s strike by complete coincidence in stride, acting as if it was a matter of course. At the same time, however, questions did arise in her mind. Even though she was carrying Atra, Ange had caught up way too fast for her Agility level. Serge knew her own Agility stat was lower than Ange’s, but it was still a very impressive number. In light of the effort she had made in obscuring

her passage and the support she automatically received from Absolute Gospel, she hadn't expected to be found so easily.

Whoa, this is like an entirely different world. It's gonna take some getting used to.

Ange did have a skill set specialized for detecting things, but it was difficult even for her to discover Serge when the latter was focused on escaping. As soon as Ange lost sight of Serge, the latter's luck would work in a way that obfuscated efforts at picking up her trail again. The key to Ange managing to catch up was the Sonic Acceleration spell. Her base Agility stat already greatly exceeded 5,000, so a spell that doubled that number made her an absolute beast. After Kelvin had buffed her, she had basically run up the hole and searched its entire width to find Serge and catch her unawares.

"I admit, you did catch me by surprise, but what now? Do you want to fight me one-on-one?"

"Hardly. I'm not that much of a battle junkie."

"Well, doesn't matter. I'm strongest when I'm protecting some— Huh?"

Before Serge finished speaking, Ange turned her back on her and put some distance between them, explaining, "My role is to be my party's eyes. As long as I keep you in my sight, we won't lose you again. Oh, and one more thing. Kelvin says, 'Let me at least have a taste.'"

"Ange, are you sure your boyfriend isn't touched in the head? I'm pretty sure he is."

While watching Ange disappear into the shadows, Atra, who still could not fully understand the situation, inwardly shouted, *What about me?!* Admittedly, there was merit to both her and Serge's indignation, but they had no time to entertain such emotions.

"Come now, lass, stay awhile! Our hospitality is like none other!"

Serge's eyes widened with surprise as she suddenly found Sword Guru's greatsword rushing towards her seemingly out of nowhere. She blocked it head-on with her own sword, but the ferocity of witnessing the clash up close was enough to almost make Atra faint.

“Oh, right, Grim Reaper was a Summoner. He doesn’t act like one at all, so I’d completely forgotten.”

Gerard, who had been Summoned immediately in front of Serge, smiled wryly. Now that Ange had a bead on her, Kelvin’s entire party was privy to her position in real time, and he could Summon any of his Followers to her as long as she was within his magical range. And this place, Floor Eight, was very much within that range.

“To think you actually blocked my attack! This world sure is large!”

“Aha hah, and now my arm’s kinda numb.”

After deflecting Gerard’s blade, Serge made a large detour and sped past him. Breaking through his guard clearly would require a lot of effort, but her goal was to avoid combat. She figured this way was much easier.

“There she is! Ready, Shutola?”

However, when Serge reached the next room, she found it already cleared of monsters with Sera standing imposingly in the center. Beside her were Shutola on Georgios and ranks of Guards in defensive formation.

“Mh-hm, I’m ready, but...isn’t that Atra-san from the orphanage in her arms?”

“Don’t worry; Kelvin’s given us his guarantee! He says that the world’s most powerful Hero is definitely capable of protecting her!”

“I...guess that’s okay, then?”

Despite having misgivings, Shutola decided to take the word of her trusted companion at face value. One swing of her hand, and the Guards under her control directed their Gatling guns towards the Hero all at once.

“FIRE!”

For some reason, the person who swung her hand and gleefully gave the order was Sera and not Shutola, but the latter decided to play along and unleashed a massive barrage of magical bullets.

The wall of projectiles was so overwhelming that there was truly no gap for Serge to slip through. However, if she stopped now, not only would Gerard catch up, but any one of Kelvin’s Followers could suddenly show up behind her

back. And even if she somehow got through the hail of bullets, the redheaded demon and blonde saint were still lying in wait.

With Ange's eyes constantly on her, it would be difficult for Serge to conceal herself. This was a situation in which she could not let down her guard for even a moment. Still, she laughed with delight.

"I knew it! Hanging out with someone really is a lot more fun than just sitting around!"

Thinking about it, the most powerful individuals in this world all had a tendency to laugh when backed into a corner. They all had different reasons for doing so, but perhaps everyone who honed an ability to such a level of mastery had a screw or two loose in their head. At least, that was the impression that Atra, as a representative of the normal people in the world, had.

"Don't you think so too, Sister Atra? Hm? Sister Atra?"

Or rather, that was the impression Atra would have had if she were actually conscious. She did not answer Serge because she had already fainted a while ago, overwhelmed by the terrifying attacks flying about and the exceedingly dense magic in the air.

"Ahhh, I guess that would happen."

Serge turned her eyes from Atra back to the incoming bullets. The way she saw it, if she was going to get out of this situation anyway, she'd rather do it the fun way. So she decided to charge straight in, brandishing her Holy Sword.

"So fast! She's so fast! Shutola, look at how fast she is!"

"Dearest sister Sera, this isn't the time to be celebrating it!"

A single swing of Serge's sword erased an entire swathe of magical bullets, and she was swinging her blade at incredible speed. Just as it seemed she had made one swing, her sword had already finished going through the motions of the next. Every single flash of the blade was as fast as Setsuna's instant draw. In this way, a passage large enough for two girls was being carved through the thick wall of attacks. Serge looked very much in control of the situation.

::Of course, that's not all we got, right, grandpa?!::

::Damn right!::

In response to Shutola's telepathic message, Gerard, from his position behind Serge, slammed his shield into the ground and roared, "Reflective Dreadnought!"

Immediately, runes blazed all around the giant black shield that was Kelvin's handiwork. The next instant, a golden-white barrier sprang up. It greatly resembled the one that Ragat, one of the ancient heroes, had stacked onto his own shield for further defensive ability, but the effect of Gerard's move was entirely different.

Soon enough, the Gatling bullets that had shot past Serge without being erased made contact with this barrier. When they did, however, they did not slow down or grow weaker. Instead, they bounced back, of all things.

"Are you kidding me?"

Even while forging her way ahead, Serge noticed that she was now being attacked from the back too. Her face twitched a little from the strain as, even though she could not actually look behind her, she instinctively sensed that Gerard had done something. And the bullets were not simply being reflected. Despite the number she was erasing, the quantity now assaulting her back matched the quantity coming from the front, and they even seemed slightly more powerful.

Reflective Dreadnought was the new name of Gerard's shield after Kelvin had upgraded it using parts from Tyrant Mirror, the enemy that had shown up during the battle at Trycen Castle and proved capable of deflecting any and all attacks. On top of a massive boost in its defensive value, this shield possessed the same reflective ability that once belonged to Tyrant Mirror. What's more, thanks to Gerard's Self-Transcendence skill, the shield's ability had been bolstered even further, such that it also increased the destructive power and the quantity of the attacks it reflected. The only drawback was that the reflection cost quite a lot of MP, so Gerard had to carefully choose when and where to use it.

Consequently, Serge was now pincered by projectiles coming from both her front and back.

“I guess it’s time to let loose.”

Serge deftly shifted Atra from under her arm to her back and started chanting at high speed. The next instant, Atra, who was still unconscious, clutched tightly to Serge using her arms and legs. This effectively freed up Serge’s left arm.

“Will, let’s show them just a little bit of your power.”

The Holy Sword in her hand immediately gave off a blinding light. Exactly as it had happened for Touya before, the light split into two and gathered at her hands, taking form as two perfect copies of itself.

::So that really is Holy Sword Will. I wonder which is the real one. Oh, right, I should let Kelvin and the others know.::

::Dearest sister Sera, this isn’t the time for that!::

Sera seemed to be fondly recalling the past, but Shutola was freaking out about the present. She was entirely sure that now that Serge had two swords—as well as Dual Wield, the skill that could only be acquired by Heroes—her fighting ability was going to skyrocket. And sure enough, the girl was now brushing away every projectile that came near her with dance-like movements, still making steady progress towards Sera and Shutola’s position with the same speed as before. Both Serge and Atra remained unharmed, with the former smiling like she was having the time of her life.

“Everyone, close formation!”

Shutola made the front row of Guards brace with their shields and stick out their lances through the gaps, effectively forming a phalanx. Throughout this time, the golems maintained their barrage of bullets, which were fired from the guns outfitted to their lances. However, this did not seem to change the battle situation in any way. In fact, Shutola was almost convinced that even if she added Guards firing from the left and right, Serge would still remain unharmed.

“Hup!”

“What?”

Just as she had done with Gerard earlier, Serge clearly planned on simply running past the Guards rather than properly engaging them in combat. The

instant she passed the doorframe and entered the room, she leaped onto the wall and started running along it. That's right, she was wallrunning like it was the most natural thing to do. Had her outfit been black instead of white, she would have been the spitting image of a ninja. She did it so well that she could have served as a good role model for Ruka, the apprentice maid who was actually starting to develop her abilities in that particular direction as of late. Shutola found her chest beating quickly with excitement like a foreigner who was extremely into ninjas.

However, as could be expected of someone who could perform Parallel Processing even without the skill, she was just as quick to realize her own mistake. After instantly coming up with a solution, she immediately turned her attention back to the fight at hand.

Wait, no! I gotta focus. I can ask dearest sister Ange or Rion-chan to do it another time.

"You're facing me next!"

Sera was now standing on the wall too, just like Serge, fully decked out in Blood Scrimmage. She had one oversized arm dug into the wall and was forcibly maintaining her posture through her wings and Flight skill. Here was someone who hated being one-upped.

Abruptly, Serge commented, "Wow, you really are similar to her. Though there are parts where you clearly aren't..." She shot a quick glance at Sera's bountiful chest.

"Like who? Which part?"

"That's also something you can ask Reviver later!"

"Wait, hold on!"

In the split second when Sera was distracted, Serge leaped off the wall and landed back on the ground. She continued running on, heading towards the space occupied only by the mountains of humanoid monsters that Sera had presumably cleared out earlier, and puddles of their blood. The Guards she had passed by running on the wall could no longer fire at her in proper formation, not in such close quarters, which meant they could no longer hurt her. Some of

the puddles on the ground actually had Sera's blood, but thanks to her ridiculous luck, Serge did not step in any of them.

"Well, bye-bye!" Serge turned around to wave to the group while running backward.

Just then, a voice rang out from behind one of the mountains of corpses.

"Frozen Temple!"



Ten pillars rose from the ground, casting a blue aura that took on the shape of a temple.

"Whoops!" Serge stumbled but immediately regained her balance. However, her movements were now noticeably slower. "Ooooh, this is..."

"Sera-san, now!" Nana shouted, emerging from behind the mountain of monster corpses, covered in blood.

If she had been asked to hold her breath and hide in such a place before the boot camp, she would have screamed and refused with all her might. However, the hellish program where Sera had forced her to get used to a similar environment was showing instant results. Nana now carried herself with confidence and poise, not bothered in the slightest by the red gunk plastered all over her body. No hint of her previously timid manner remained.

A second look revealed that Nana was holding something in her hand. It was the Magical Jewel that Miyabi had "borrowed" from Priscilla, one of the officers of Black Wind, the bandit gang that the Heroes of Deramis had been chasing down when they first met Kelvin. This Magical Jewel, which was made of diamond and therefore of the highest grade, made Nana's Frozen Temple far more effective than it had ever been.

Nana's spell also served as the trigger for Sera to shift into action. "Looks like you're really lucky, so I'll be coming at you myself! Arise, Hades's Sanguine Army!"

The puddles of blood surrounding Serge coagulated and took the form of crimson skeletons. When Ange had started broadcasting Serge's location, Sera

had liquefied all the skeletons she had brought with her, disguising them among puddles of monster blood. The idea was that if Serge stepped in even one of them, it would be able to steal her mobility. However, the plan had fallen through, so Sera had caught on to the fact that she would get nowhere passively waiting and therefore made the decision to order her skeletons to attack.

Eerie groaning emanated from bony jaws, filling the air. How ironic it was that these skeletons that had been made from the corpses of those who worshipped Elearis were now assaulting Serge, an Apostle sworn to serve the very same goddess.

The undead warriors put on the armor left behind by other monsters and blindly rushed at Serge as if, even in death, they sought to cling to what they had believed in. Some of them tripped on the way over, but they could hardly be faulted, considering who they were up against.

Serge isn't showing any sign of attacking my skeletons, Sera noted. Does she know about the effects of Blood Dominion? Well, that Bahl girl seemed to know, so I guess it's not surprising. The fact that my skeletons aren't being purified means Serge doesn't have Absolute Purification like Rion does. That leaves only her luck to worry about...I think? Hmm, that doesn't seem quite right somehow.

Despite feeling like something was off, Sera charged into the fray between her skeletons and the Hero. Thanks to Nana, Serge was now moving much slower, though she was still agile enough to evade the sanguine skeletons' attacks.

"Felony Crush."

The Heroes of Deramis weren't done yet. Miyabi stepped out from behind another mountain of corpses to cast Black Magic that increased the gravity felt by only the target of the spell. The target that she had set was not Serge, however—it was the nun on her back, Atra.

"So...so heavy! Ms. Nun, you're way too heavy!"

"Talking about a girl's weight is taboo. Feel the weight of your transgression as you repent!"

Miyabi had chosen to cast her spell on Atra because she figured it would be more effective on an ordinary person than the alleged strongest Hero in history. It proved to be the right call, successfully making Atra even more of a burden on Serge's back. Every time someone said "heavy" or "weight," Atra's eyelids seemed to twitch as if she were reflexively reacting despite still being unconscious.

"Here's more! Hades's Army!" Miyabi shouted, adopting a pose like a character in a distinctive manga. Her magic seeped into corpses all around the room, making the ones that had hidden her earlier stand up with zombielike movements and join Sera's crimson skeletons. Just like the bullets shot by Shutola's Guards, the point was to overwhelm Serge with the sheer number of attacks.

Unable to fully dodge everything, Serge finally began fighting back, though she focused only on Miyabi's forces. Unbeknownst to her, two more individuals had slipped into the surging crowd of undead.

"As taught by Rion-chan!"

"Flying slash!"

Touya and Setsuna had also been hiding. What these two had just unleashed was the version of Agito that Rion had taught them. As they were still in the middle of learning it, their range was quite limited, but they could incorporate their respective abilities into the attacks—Touya could send two slashes at once, while Setsuna's slashes were much faster and could cut through everything. Their attacks had come from blind spots created by the jostling crowd of skeletons, bisecting many of those skeletons with their passage.

"Oh, hey, you guys are this era's Heroes? I've heard so much about you. I couldn't be prouder to see how strong my successors are!"

Unfortunately, Serge's luck interfered once again, causing Touya's slashes to veer off in random directions after only hitting a few skeletons. Setsuna's slash flew true, but Serge managed to dodge it by a paper-thin margin the instant it entered her view.

"Dammit!" Touya swore. "Can we really not land anything on her?!"

“Nope! You did good!” Sera replied as her fist landed squarely on Serge’s flank at the precise moment she was left wide open due to being mid-dodge.

A dull crack reverberated throughout Serge’s body as a small fountain of blood burst from her mouth. “Pah!”

“I! GOT! YOU! NOW!” Shouting at the top of her lungs, Sera followed through with her punch. The uppercut sent Serge—along with Atra—smashing into the ceiling, creating an upside-down crater. Serge immediately recovered, but instead of jumping back into the fight, she made a mad dash for the exit. Her white outfit was now covered in dust, indicating that she had positioned herself to take the hit instead of Atra. The abdominal part was torn clean off as if it had gotten snagged on something, revealing painful-looking wounds that stood out starkly against her white skin.

What a coincidence that it was exactly the part of her clothes with my blood on it that was torn off! Sera thought wryly.

“Owww! I really don’t think I can ever get used to taking hits head-on,” Serge grumbled, rubbing where she had gotten hurt.

However, she does take hits, Sera noted.

Touya cried, “Oh no, she’s getting away!”

That moment, Kelvin ordered an all-out bombardment. *Everyone, FIRE!*

In response, Rion, Efil, and Ange—the first two from ground level, the last from midair, all of them buffed with Sonic Acceleration—dispelled Covert Action and launched a barrage of attacks, focusing on quantity over quality. Slashes, explosions, and poisoned knives filled the air in a chaotic mess, flying towards Serge from every direction. Of course, some of them changed course. Some of them blew up in the wielder’s hands, harming them instead. Even so, the trio continued attacking, instantly making what corrections they could. Soon enough, attacks started slipping past Serge’s swords.

Kelvin commented through the Network, *Looks like Sister Atra is still unharmed. Something must be going on: maybe Serge cast a barrier that’s blocking everything. However, Serge is still making the effort to block the larger attacks, so I’d venture to say the barrier can’t take too much damage.*

::Should we hold back, Master?::

No, we don't have the leeway. We're having enough difficulty as is; we can't be worrying about the barrier too.

Rion's shadow expanded as Kelvin emerged in his distinctive black robe. He looked up at Serge.

Absolute Gospel is a powerful skill. Almost too powerful, you could say. But it's by no means all-powerful. If it was, Serge wouldn't have needed to deflect the Guards' Gatling guns with her swords—the bullets should have evaded her on their own. Sera wouldn't have been able to land a hit either, and something would have happened to wipe out all the skeletons. Thinking about it now, a few of Ruka's knives did land on Touya during their fight. And Miyabi wouldn't have been able to cast Felony Crush on Atra so easily.

Miyabi perked up as if she had felt someone snub her, but Kelvin continued regardless. *All the above leads me to conclude that there's a limit to how many targets her luck can affect at any given time. When that threshold is exceeded, she has to deal with the overflow herself. She may be the world's strongest fighter, but she's still human. Just like me and you, she must have her limits.*

As Kelvin raised one hand, the appearance and properties of the ground changed. Countless blades rose slowly. "C'mon, 'strongest Hero in history.' I hope you plan on getting serious soon. This can't be all you've got. I did say I just wanted a taste, but you're literally kidnapping a girl. I'm not going to hold back. If you keep holding back on us, you're gonna die."

The blades, all imbued with Ground Cleave, flew up and pierced Serge's body.

"What kind of a joke is this?" Kelvin growled, glaring at Serge with disgruntlement in his eyes.

"Ha ha, looks like I bit off more than I can chew," the Hero replied. "And here I thought I'd get at least as far as Crux Bridge, even with the girl on my back."

"That's not what I'm asking. Why didn't you get serious? You really are gonna die at this rate."

The many swords that Kelvin had generated were now piercing Serge's body. She was sitting on the ground, propped up by the gleaming blades that nailed

her to the wall in the form of a crucifix. Sister Atra was beside her, still clinging to Serge's arm due to the spell that had been cast on her earlier. The way she looked like a nun caring for a wounded person gave her the image of a true saint, painting a sharp contrast to her usual brash manner.

Serge chuckled. "You're right. I really am going to die at this rate." Despite the blood now trickling out of her mouth, she still looked like she was having fun.

"Why didn't you block my attack? You had enough strength to avoid taking anything fatal. And you haven't used that white shield of yours either."

"Aw, you saw that? You sure have sharp eyes. As expected of Melfina's Apostle. But I figured this way is more of a guarantee. It's too bad I can't bring the sheath back too..." Serge shot Atra a look. "But I've at least achieved my bare minimum goal."

"Sheath...as in the sheath for Holy Lance Eclipse?"

"Oh? You know about it?"

Holy Lance Eclipse was the favored weapon of Elearis, the previous Goddess of Reincarnation. Kelvin had heard from Melfina that it had lost all its power and was currently sealed here on the deepest floor within the Catacombs of Heroic Spirits. The only way to restore its power was to deposit it within a descendant of the true bloodline of Deramis. In other words, Sister Atra, who had been housing Eclipse, was Pope Philip Deramilius's biological daughter and Colette's sister from another mother. The truth was that there were quite a few others who also bore Philip's blood, although Colette was the one who had inherited the true power and was therefore entrusted with the duty of Oracle. Atra had been excluded from the selection early on due to displaying characteristics of her mother's blood far more than her father's and had consequently been consigned to an orphanage when she was still a baby. Of course, she had no idea of her own lineage.

Kelvin shrugged. "I didn't know it in advance, but the fact that you're referring to Sister Atra as the sheath of Holy Lance Eclipse can only mean that she possesses the blood of Deramis, right?"

Not even Melfina had seen this coming. While removing the hexes from the girl's body, she had noticed the lance sleeping inside her, but that was when

Serge had revealed herself. Understandably, Philip had wanted to keep it a secret. The man who led the Holy Order of Rinne and sat at the top of the Holy Empire of Deramis had multiple illegitimate children. This was naturally illicit—if word went out, it would generate a storm of criticism. That said, the power of the Oracle was deeply related to the power of future Heroes. A certain degree of flexibility would be needed in regard to what happened to avoid setting off troublesome political fallout.

“To be honest, we would have preferred Colette. But...well, she’s a lot better protected, isn’t she?” Serge chuckled.

“So the reason you guys staged this large-scale kidnapping was to get your hands on a descendant of Deramis to serve as a sheath for Eclipse. But isn’t Iris Deramilius on your side? She used to be an Oracle way back, right?”

“You mean Arbitrator? Ah, sadly, she doesn’t serve as a sheath anymore. Probably because she’s now a demigod.”

Despite being so heavily injured, Serge remained as talkative as ever. Kelvin was aware that he was probing pretty hard with his questions, but she was glibly answering them all.

“Uh-oh, looks like my time’s about up. Assassin, what kind of poison did you use? I’ve almost lost all feeling in my body.”

The way Serge chuckled cheerfully did not sound like someone on the verge of death, but she was bleeding profusely where the blades protruded from her body. Judging from the size of the puddle of blood already gathered beneath her, she really was going to die soon.

“You—”

“One last thing.” Serge suddenly adopted a serious tone, cutting Kelvin off. “The Unique Skill that Arbitrator gave me when she brought me back is called A New Journey. The cooldown is a month. Ha ha, a Hero dying is pretty lame, huh? Well, you can ask Reviver for the details. It’s goodbye for now, but I’m sure I’ll be seeing you again.”

Serge stabbed her own heart with her Holy Sword. Still maintaining her cheerful smile, the girl turned to light and disappeared.



When everything was over, my party returned to the Palace of Deramis and met with Pope Philip, Cardinal Sai, and Colette to report on what had happened inside the Catacombs of Heroic Spirits.

“Mm, I see.” Philip nodded. “I think I get the gist of it now.”

“So yeah, I’m afraid Holy Lance Eclipse is gone,” Kelvin concluded.

Serge had disappeared and Sister Atra had been safely rescued. However, Eclipse had already been extracted from Atra. When we asked Estoria about A New Journey, Serge’s Unique Skill, she answered quite readily.

The skill enabled Serge to respawn at a specified location—this was, in effect, the same ability that Blessing of the Goddess of Reincarnation had given me, with the added option of choosing where to reappear. She was likely already back in her hideout by now. According to Estoria, the reason Serge had left Atra behind was that she could only apply her ability to herself. Her talking about the cooldown was perhaps meant as a threat that if I was later than a month, she might respawn again.

Hold on, depending on the way I think about it, if I carefully manage when I look for her, I can fight her an infinite number of times, right? Like, again, again, again, again, again, aga—

“Heyyyy there. You with us, Kelvin-kun?” Philip waved a hand in my face.

“Oh, I’m sorry. The regret from having let an enemy slip through our grasp got to me for a moment just now.” *Yeah, on second thought, we don’t really have to hurry.*

“What are you saying?!” Sai exclaimed. “What you’ve accomplished is nothing short of astounding! You’ve captured one Apostle of Elearis, wiped out the insurgent faction, and safely rescued all the children they kidnapped. On top of that, you even brought Murmur-sama, the Light Dragon King who once served as our guardian, back to life! And he promised to protect us again! You’ve been an absolute blessing!”

“That’s right! What Mel-sama and Kelvin-sama have achieved is incredible!” Colette agreed passionately.

They sure are easy to please...

As Sai mentioned, the “I’m no longer my noble self” dragon that I had fought in the dungeon did agree to become this country’s guardian again, saying something along the lines of he was doing it as an apology for all the trouble he’d caused, or as thanks for bringing him back to life. He technically wasn’t a dragon king anymore, but there was no doubt he was still a powerful ancient dragon.

“And you even revived Sorondil and Ragat, my comrades in arms,” Philip added. “Speaking of which, why are they encased in ice?”

“Your Holiness, don’t worry about such trivial and inconsequential details!” Colette chided him. “All that matters is that Melfina-sama brought the ancient heroes back to us. Oh, what benevolence and mercy she showers us with!”

“Well, a lot happened,” Melfina said, waving a hand dismissively. “Just leave them out in the sun for a few days and they’ll melt by themselves.”

“Whaaaat...”

Ah, yes, we did pick up two large chunks of ice on our way back. Encased within were the ancient heroes who had supposedly partied with Serge, Philip, and Sai back in the day. I had yet to talk with them, so I had no idea what their personalities were like, but appearance-wise, they looked like an old elf guy and a muscular knight. Sadly, they did not seem all that strong.

“Efil, use your flames at moderate heat and help get them out,” I ordered.

“Yes, Master.” Efil bowed.

Philip smiled wryly. “Thanks for that. Next, I want to ask about the Apostle you captured. Oh, don’t worry, I’ll leave Melfina-sama with full authority to deal with her as she pleases,” he said before giving Gerard a wink. Considering how handsome he was, he totally clinched the gesture, but Gerard just looked confused.

Good, so Philip was listening closely to our report.

“No, I have something else that needs to be asked first,” Colette interrupted. “Your Holiness, how can Sister Atra be your child?”

“Colette?! Um, can we not talk about that now—”

“I. Want. An. Explanation. Be detailed, specific, and entirely forthright, please.”

Clearly, Colette was winning this family feud. She had even made us the heartening promise that she would help to negotiate the absolute best reparation possible from the pope for all the trouble he had caused us.

In any case, after a long debriefing session, my party left the pope’s quarters. Just as we were about to head off to the rooms we’d been assigned, Cardinal Sai called out to us.

“Um, this might be an inappropriate thing to ask since all of you did just fight her, but...how was Serge? Was she doing well?”

It wasn’t exactly the right atmosphere to tell him that she had been so energetic that she’d played tag with us, so I simply gave him the generic “Yep, she was doing good” answer.



Once back in my room, Melfina, Rion, and I sat down on the bed and chairs. I very much wanted to immediately sleep off the day’s fatigue, but there was something else I still had to make a call on.

“Rion, please bring Estoria out.”

“Sure thing. Alex, please and thank you.”

Rion’s shadow rippled, and Estoria appeared, still restrained by both Alex’s shadows and Clotho. She was deposited facedown on the floor, then further secured by multiple hands made of shadow. We’d already healed her up, so there were no external wounds on her body. However, her MP was still fully drained, so she was in an extremely listless state.

“Where...are we? It looks too clean...to be a torture chamber...”

“Where could it be indeed?”

Before chasing after Serge back in the Catacombs of Heroic Spirits, I’d asked Alex to use his Creeping Darkness to take Melfina, Estoria, and me into Rion’s shadow. Melfina was there to keep an eye on Estoria, whereas I was there

simply because that was the fastest way for me to travel. After dealing with Serge, Estoria had been put back inside the makeshift prison. It was the easiest way to transport her, after all.

What I had to do now was decide the fate of this vampire, as Pope Philip had left it entirely to my party's discretion. Although she had lost her Unique Skill and had been freed from being an Apostle, we couldn't very well let her loose. Her situation was quite different from Ange, with whom I'd already had a relationship at the time. Worst case, Estoria could return to being an Apostle and harm me and my companions.

I don't mind if all she does is stalk Gerard— Oh, wait, no, it'd be pretty annoying having her constantly sniffing around our house. Please don't do that either.

"We will be deciding what to do with you now," Melfina announced.

"So, I will be punished directly by the Goddess of Reincarnation, also known as the 'goddess of benevolence.'" Estoria smiled in self-deprecation. "That's almost too honorable an ending for someone like me, who's only lived for love —"

Melfina interrupted her. "It's too early to jump to conclusions. What happens to you will depend on you yourself."

"That's right." I nodded. "For us, you're an important source of information. If possible, I'd like to form a win-win relationship where both sides stand to gain something. First—"

"Would you tell me what Gerard-sama likes?"

"Uh...of course."

"In that case, feel free to ask me anything you like."

Um, did her eyes just change? Am I imagining it or do they now look like the eyes of a hawk with its sights set on prey? They looked really dead mere seconds ago. Well, if that's all she wants, I don't mind.

"I have a few things I want to ask. But I guess it makes sense to first ask about your ability. 'Uprising,' was it? Tell us everything about it."

“Why do you want to know about an ability that I can’t even use anymore? Not that I mind telling you.”

The issue isn’t whether you can use it or not. You’ve already used it on Murmur and the heroes Melfina froze. Those newly revived people aren’t going to live forever, right? In most works in this genre, clones often live much shorter lives. Not that Estoria was cloning them, but still, I want to know if they’re guaranteed a certain amount of time. I noticed Estoria used her ability on many of the monsters in the dungeon too, so I want to know the details.

“Well, I suppose I’ll start from the conditions needed to use it,” Estoria said before giving us a full lecture on Uprising.

First, in order to revive someone, she needed a catalyst of either their remains or an article that belonged to them. The more she had of that person’s remains, or the more the article meant to the person, the more perfectly she could bring them back.

This led to the question of what it meant to “perfectly” revive someone: everything that made them “them,” including their original life span, stats, memories, and sense of self. She could technically use her ability on the undead too, but on top of not having memories and reasoning, their life spans would be quite short. This was exactly what had happened to the monsters on Floor Eight. All they had left was a highly belligerent nature extraneous to their personalities from when they were alive—in a way, this was even more troubling than coming back fully conscious.

Now, what about the ancient heroes? In a stroke of fortune, Estoria had managed to revive them with almost complete perfection. As befitted members of the party that had defeated Demon Lord Gustav, their bodies had been buried with great care, which made for top-tier catalysts. *They’re still weak, though. Sigh.* Conditions were the same for the no-longer-noble Murmur. Not a surprise, considering that giant-ass tombstone he got. His life span was pretty much entirely intact too.

Lastly, Uprising had one more function. Despite supposedly having been revived perfectly, Murmur had been quite belligerent. I mean, thinking about it now, I admit it was sort of my fault, but he’d turned hostile because of

memories he did not remember obtaining while alive. From what I'd heard, this was even more striking in the ancient heroes. After Marcel had turned into a monster, they had called it "mother," "little girl," "Serge," and a whole lot of other things, revealing pretty unique sexual dispositions. If her companions had actually been that way when they were alive, I could understand why Serge would want to return to Japan. I sympathized greatly with Cardinal Sai, the only normal person in their group.

But I digress. Let's get back to the topic. So, the final function of Uprising was to alter the memories and dispositions of the targets. It was because Murmur knew the tombstone we had destroyed was his own that he had snapped upon meeting us. The ancient heroes saw illusions of who they thought were their loved ones and chose to fight Melfina to protect them. All the alterations had been to make everything become hostile to me and my group.

"Estoria, my opinion of you has just shot up. You're not too bad."

Melfina whirled around. "Honey?!"

That last option could only be used on those who had been perfectly revived. After all, there was no point altering the memories of someone who didn't have them in the first place.

"Heh heh, now I'm one step closer to Gerard-sama."

"Just saying, I am *not* happy with this, but I shall suffer it for now." Melfina cleared her throat and sat up straight. "I have a question. Estoria Kranweltz, were you the one who gave that stake to Cardinal Marcel Gottes?"

"Yes, it was me."

This Marcel that Melfina was referring to—who had been mentioned briefly just now—was an old cardinal with a red stole. He had stabbed his own heart with a stake, which had turned him into a monster.

"Marcel was not a man who would side with the insurgent faction. Did you provoke him?"

"Well, in his case...did you know that he lost his wife and child a few decades ago? His child went a particularly tragic way, I heard. Marcel was embroiled in a power struggle, and his family ended up being collateral damage. It's a dark

story, so I won't go into details. Let's just say that Marcel had a lot of things on his mind."

"Then?"

"In a stroke of unfortunate timing, he witnessed me using my power and begged me to bring his daughter back to life. After that, it's as you can imagine. He used me, and I used him. I had no intention of using my power without compensation, so I set a pretty steep price for my services. That's about all there is to say about it."

Estoria stopped talking then. I could imagine Marcel's daughter still alive out there. I had no proof, but she was likely somewhere safe and set up for life.

"That's all?" I shook my head in an exaggerated way. "I suppose this Cardinal Marcel was an idiot, then."

"Why... Why do you say that?" Estoria asked.

"I mean, how is he not? He gave in to temptation, exposing all the children of the orphanage to danger for the sake of his own child. If not an idiot, then he was a fool. How did someone like that become a cardinal? You agree with me, right, Melfina?"

"Well...I do agree that he failed to live up to his role as cardinal. And that is truly deplorable."

Estoria mumbled something, filling the room with a killing intent that I found very comfortable.

"What was that?" I asked.

"WHAT DO YOU TWO KNOW ABOUT HIM?!" she shouted. "He paid the price to bring his loved one back! It might be desperate, but I don't think it's a bad thing at all! He can't be wrong, not when he was overflowing with so much love! I won't allow anyone to insult him! Not even you, the goddess of benevolence!"

Estoria's thoughts came out in one uninterrupted torrent, her shoulders quivering from the force of her emotions. There was no falsehood or pretense in the eyes glaring at Melfina and me. She could not stand us making fun of

Marcel, possibly because she herself lived for love or because she saw herself in the way that Cardinal Marcel lived his life. There was no way for me to tell which one it was, but both were fine with me. When someone truly believes in something, it can make them incredibly strong. That's been a fact since the dawn of time. And that's all that mattered to me.

Also, I think you'd reach Gerard better if you spoke frankly to him like this.

"Will you look at that? You *can* be honest with yourself." I turned to Melfina, now ignoring the vampire lady literally glaring daggers our way. "Mel, I still don't fully trust her, but as long as we're careful about how we proceed, she's got an okay from me."

Mel nodded. "Very well; I shall make the arrangements."

Rion, who had remained silent the whole time, commented, "Gramps sure has it tough."

"Arf!" (He's one popular old man.)



"Are you sure about this?" Estoria was now back to wearing a nun's habit and having chestnut-colored hair. She looked quite bewildered by the situation and had repeated the same question many times on our way there.

"How many times do you want me to repeat myself? Mel and I are the ones who suggested it. And the pope's given his permission too."

"I mean, but..."

No buts or ifs. We had made up our minds that Estoria was to continue staying with the children at the orphanage in the exact same capacity as before.

I sighed. "All right, this is the last time. Colette, go over it again." In spite of my exasperated tone, it wasn't me doing the explaining but Colette, who was walking with us.

"Gladly!"

Although I'd been asking her to do the same thing repeatedly, Colette did not hesitate to accept. In fact, she had been staring at me as if begging me to give her more orders. *Okay, I get it already. Stop breathing so heavily. It's really*

creeping me out!

“Under Mel-sama’s and Kelvin-sama’s auspices, you now have a duty to fulfill, Sister Ria. And that duty is—”

“To protect Atra, right?”

“Exactly.”

Through the kidnapping incident, it was revealed that Sister Atra was the pope’s daughter. Now that the characteristics of Holy Lance Eclipse had come to light, it only made sense to strengthen the security of her surroundings. It’s easy to say this should have been done earlier, but apparently Colette was the only one of Philip’s children who could properly activate the abilities of an Oracle, which explained why he had been remiss in this area. The fact that Atra could express only a tiny bit of power as an Oracle—weak enough to be overlooked, but just enough for her to be a sheath—and her position as an illegitimate child had made her the perfect target for the Apostles.

However, assigning a large number of guards or veteran warriors to safeguard Atra would only draw untoward attention. This was where Estoria, or “Sister Ria,” the normal nun who’d always been serving at the orphanage but actually possessed incredible battle strength, came in.

“I’m very happy with this arrangement myself, but you dears are definitely weird for allowing it.”

“Ria, mind your speech pattern,” I warned. “We’re getting close.”

“Ah! Uh, um, I’m sorry!”

Whoa, her personality changed in a split second.

Estoria’s mature, bewitching aura was immediately replaced by a timidity and fretfulness as she started looking around anxiously. According to her, this wasn’t acting on her part, but an actual personality she had created in the past when she went too far searching for love, and her being sexy was the act. It was a bit confusing keeping track, but if she was more comfortable this way, then power to her.

“Of course, we’re not letting you go entirely unsupervised,” Melfina said. “The

crucifix necklace you're wearing casts a certain restriction on you. If you ever do anything that triggers that restriction..."

Ria gulped. "Wh-What would happen?"

Melfina smiled reassuringly. "There's no need to worry. If you live your life at the orphanage as normal and treat Sister Atra as you've always done, you'll have no problems. Just don't get up to anything you shouldn't."

"What would happen is a secret too?! Um, can you, uh, tell me the conditions for the necklace..."

"Look, the orphanage is just up ahead. Colette, finish your explanation."

"Please, have mercy!"

I watched this scene of the queen of vampires tearfully clinging to a goddess. I understood how the arrangement might make Ria anxious, but as this was a measure meant to discourage her from betraying us, it only made sense not to let her know the trigger or its resulting effect. And if she never thought about betraying us, there would be no problem. Considering the fact that her Holy Key had also been disabled—just as Ange's had been—it was safe to assume that, at least for now, she was innocent.



Colette nodded at me. “For the sake of this bodyguard mission, I will now go over our current situation. The children and Sister Atra have all safely returned to the orphanage and have been told that everything that happened was a drill.”

“Um, isn’t that, uh, a bit of a stretch? Protector was even carrying Atra and everything.”

“Fortunately, almost all the children had been put to sleep, and there are no signs of abuse on their bodies. Sister Atra’s memories of the incident are quite vague, so I’ve given her an account of what happened. Sister Marigan is fully aware of the circumstances, so that only leaves you, Sister Ria. If you help back our story up, then everything will work out fine.”

Upon hearing the full explanation from Colette, Ria apprehensively turned to look at Melfina.

Melfina smiled again. “Live *as normal*, okay?”

“Eep! Y-Yes, ma’am!”

And now we had the scene of the queen of vampires being threatened by a goddess. In any case, that was the orphanage incident all wrapped up.

“Um, Kelvin-san.”

“Yes, Ria?”

“Um, if you have the time, please drop by the orphanage every once in a while. I’m sure the children would be happy to see Shutola-chan again. And, um, if Gerard-san comes too, I’ll also, um, I’ll... I’ll be happy too!”

If this is her true personality, I think she might actually stand a chance with Gerard.



After safely escorting Ria to the orphanage, my party returned to the Palace of Deramis. With how much information we had gained this time, I wanted to get everyone together to make sure we were all on the same page about what we would be doing going forward.

I called the entire party to Mel's room. *What?* I didn't invite Touya's group, of course. From what I'd heard, they were busy preparing for a parade to celebrate their return. *Sounds like a pain. I'm glad I'm not involved.*

"All right, silence, everyone. We're now beginning our regular meeting."

A hand went up. "Um, Kelvin-sama, if we're having a meeting, should I prepare a meeting room?"

I *did* invite Colette, however, as she had been a huge help behind the scenes this time. She had successfully wrangled a staggering reward bonus from Pope Philip for us as well as authorization to use the teleportation gate in Deramis, plus the promise of priority access to facilities within Deramis and churches of the Order of Rinne all over the world. Did I say wrangle? I meant negotiate. But semantics aside, there was no doubt that she had done great.

"Nah, it's fine," I replied. "I called this a meeting, but you see how everyone's treating it."

I jerked my chin towards Sera, who was lying facedown on the bed and flutter-kicking her legs with her face buried in Clotho's body in lieu of a pillow, completely in resting mode. And as always, Melfina was busy shoveling food into her mouth.

"Gerard, what's this I hear about you getting remarried?" Sera asked nonchalantly.

"Really?!" Dahak exclaimed. "Old man, is this true?!"

Gerard started. "What?! No, no, no, I'm not! Where did *that* rumor come from?!"

Ah, Dahak'd probably support Gerard and Estoria getting together so he could have Prettia to himself. Well, I'll give my support no matter which way it ends up. Wait, no, that's not what I gathered everyone to talk about. We're getting off track.

I cleared my throat. "So, I gathered all of you because I wanted to discuss our next step. According to Serge, we're invited to the Apostles' sanctum, which is somewhere in Abyssland."

“Abyssland is *really* big, you know?” Sera replied. “I don’t think you’d be able to find it if you’re blindly looking around.”

“Agreed.” Dahak nodded. “It’s about as big as one of the continents here on the surface.”

“Ah, no worries there. Based on Estoria’s info, I already have a general idea of where it is. The problem is how we’re gonna get to Abyssland. I looked into it, and it turns out there are only two available routes. One is to fall into the massive Waterfall of Heaven and Hell in Toraj. The other is to descend into the Fiery Mouth of Purgatory, which is located at the summit of the huge volcano in Faanis on the Western Continent.”

“Both are very treacherous,” Melfina warned.

“Which is apparently why demons rarely come up here.” I shrugged. “This trip will also count as a homecoming for Sera and Dahak, so I imagine we’ll be making a lot of detours.”

“Heh heh heh, so the day has finally come for me to become the Earth Dragon King!”

Uh, how’s that related? In the first place, if you’re going home, wouldn’t it be to where the Darkness Dragon King is?

“Speaking on Deramis’s behalf, we’d love to help you, but with your destination being what it is, I’m afraid we can’t very well send our troops with you. That said, I *can* arrange for a few powerful individuals to accompany you!” Colette’s eyes burned with purpose as the goddess she worshipped continued stuffing her face right next to her. *Could these two be any more different?*

“Well, we’re not leaving immediately. We can vote on which path to take when the time comes. Until then, everyone is free to do whatever they want. Anyone have any questions?”

With the meeting-only-in-name over, everyone got up to head back to their respective rooms. As I watched them go, Mel whispered in my ear. “Honey, may I have a bit of your time tonight?”



The Great Cathedral of Deramis was illuminated by the silver light of the moon, creating a mysterious and divine atmosphere. Everything was silent save for the odd insect chirp coming from outside. I figured the place had been set up this way so the Oracle could focus on her praying, but it was a bit too quiet for me. I tended to feel a bit lonely without sounds of activity in the background.

“Uh, what did you just say?”

“It isn’t like you to pretend to not hear something. Honey, let’s have the ceremony.”

“What ceremony?”

“The marriage ceremony, of course.”

Oh man, I think I’m getting a headache.

I was here because Melfina had asked me to come, but then she suddenly blindsided me with this. My mind struggled to process what she was saying. I had indeed promised to marry her one day. However, my promise had included *all* the girls, and I meant to do it after everything had settled down. If I gave Melfina preferential treatment, I would be breaking that promise. I would probably be drawn and quartered if I did.

“Um, Melfina, I said this before, but—”

“Honey, when you go to Abyssland, you plan on facing the Apostles and Elearis, right?”

“Hm? I mean, yeah, of course.”

“No hesitation at all, I see. Of course, I understand how you’d be excited about every last part of such a trip.”

She sighed softly, then looked straight into my eyes. Her own were illuminated by the moonlight shining through the newly replaced stained windows. She looked so beautiful, it was as if her gluttonous self from earlier was someone else entirely.

“Elearis probably has an obsession with me. I have no idea if that’s to seek revenge, to clear her resentment, or something else entirely. Simply imagining

what methods she might turn to sends a chill down my spine. However, I promise that I, as the Goddess of Reincarnation, will protect you and everyone else, even if I have to sacrifice this body of mine. And that's why..."

"That's why you want the ceremony now?"

I could see the conviction in Melfina's blue eyes. It was as strong as steel yet warm and merciful at the same time. However, I also noticed traces of the loneliness currently filling the Great Cathedral.

"C'mon, Mel, don't go setting up such a huge jinx. Who the hell would step on such an obvious land mine? If that's the way you see this trip, I sure as hell am not gonna have that ceremony."

"You're not?"

"Definitely not."

"You sure?"

"My answer is still no even if you tear up. Wait, your nose is running! Stop it! You're ruining your image as a goddess!"

I quickly took out a handkerchief and wiped Mel's nose as her dignified expression slowly scrunched up into a crying face. *Try being in my shoes. There I was, being impressed by the iron will you were displaying and your declaration to protect us all when you suddenly show me this. What happened to your mental fortitude?*

"It's okay. Cry it out. Everything's okay."

Still, I didn't expect Mel to bring up the marriage at a time like this. And surprisingly, she sounds dead serious about it. Is turning her down here really the right call? Knowing her, it could make her lose her nerve, and I would also walk away with a bitter aftertaste in my mouth.

"Just saying, I have no intention of raiding the Apostles' sanctum if it means having to sacrifice you. Going home with everyone is a nonnegotiable condition. If that's not possible, then I'll just straight-up give up the trip."

"You? The battle junkie? Will give up a trip filled with fights?"

"I'm an intelligent battle junkie. Don't lump me in with Azgrad."

Even I had my priorities straight. Intelligence and insanity were not necessarily mutually exclusive—I was a living example of someone who managed to perfectly balance the two. At the very least, that was how I saw myself. *So stop looking at me with those doubting eyes. Wait, I can think about myself that way, right? I'm sure I can. You're not thinking, "This person's definitely gonna say something different during battle," right?*

"Ahem! In any case, I absolutely forbid you from thinking about sacrificing yourself. I'm not the least bit interested in a battle that feels so wrong. If you want to do something for me, set up a fight I can enjoy from the bottom of my heart. I will make it out alive. You will make it out alive. End of discussion!"

"What you're saying is absolutely absurd, honey."

"And that's fine. I know what I want, and I won't hesitate to ask for it."

I noticed Mel's face softening. She was someone who was drastically different when she was serious versus when she was relaxed. Going all out on living was great and all, but I wished that she would learn how to rely on us, her companions, a lot more instead of shouldering everything herself.

"And while you're at it, I hope you can fix your sleeping posture too."

"Huh?"

"Oh, nothing. I was just talking to myself."

Whoops, did my inner voice slip out? I'm glad she didn't hear it.

"So, well...if you'll be doing it with the right perspective, I guess I wouldn't mind a practice run."

"You mean it, honey?!"

"Er...yeah. I promise."

The way Melfina suddenly leaned forward with a dead serious face surprised me a little. I thought I had just dodged a bullet, but for some reason, I still got chills. *Wait, that's my Danger Detection skill going off!*

"He gave his word! You heard that, Colette?"

"Yes, Mel-sama! I heard every word loud and clear!"

“What?!”

Colette suddenly appeared from behind the altar of the Great Cathedral with a triumphant face. She was wearing a habit that looked much more formal than her usual Oracle outfit. Even though I could see her, there was a transparent barrier surrounding her that prevented me from sensing her presence. *Is that another Oracle-only secret spell?!*

Sounding so enthusiastic that she was nearly beside herself, Melfina declared, “Let’s do the practice now! Making it as close as possible to the real thing! Don’t worry, the process will be extremely similar to what you know marriage ceremonies to be!”

“And though unworthy, I will be serving as the officiant,” Colette added. “Being trusted to fulfill such an important duty fills me with joy beyond words.”

“There’s no need to debase yourself so, Colette. I wouldn’t have anyone else take on this role. Honey, did you know? It’s said that couples married by the Oracle of Deramis will obtain eternal hap—”

“Hold on, hold on, hold on...”

I couldn’t help but stop the conversation before the two got any further. I needed time to process what was happening. *What was that serious atmosphere from earlier, Mel? Was it a setup? It was a setup, wasn’t it?*

“What’s this? Are you doubting me?” Mel asked, peering into my face.

“Don’t read my mind!” I protested.

She chuckled. “I was entirely candid about how serious I am about you, and in turn, I learned how serious you are about me. Your answer was everything that I wanted to hear. So this is a reward for you.”

Wait, why is this being framed as a reward for me?

“Come now, honey, there’s no need for that face. Just play along! Think of it as a little skit.”

“You... Okay. I did promise, after all. Let’s do this.”

We then had the practice ceremony with Colette directing us. Everything had been prepared in advance—even the rings. Needless to say, they were real

ones, not cheap knockoffs. Colette had packed so much of her Oracle power into those rings, it scared me—apparently, holy magic could be scary too. *Don't tell me you walked around with it all day, every day, charging it?!*

The flow of the ceremony involved exchanging vows and rings, both practices common enough in Japan that I managed to get through them smoothly enough, though I did feel nervous as it was my first time. But then things took a worrisome turn.

“You may now kiss the bride.”

I was surprised we were going this far. Truth was, I had yet to kiss Melfina even once. You might ask, “Even though you’ve slept in the same bed as her?” But that’s something you should ask the goddess, not me.

“Honey...”

Yep, ask this goddess who’s now blushing as red as a tomato.

A small part of me expected my kiss with Mel to taste of sweet confectionery, but it did not. I mean, it was sweet, in a way, but it wasn’t sweet in *that* way. It was really soft, though, and—sorry, I’ll spare you the details.



The ceremony continued without any further hiccups, and everything was over before I knew it. It didn't take too long, since we were doing it seriously and there was no reception afterwards. Part of me was relieved that I was done, while another part was getting chills just imagining the pandemonium that would break loose if Efil and the rest were to ever hear word of this. But I didn't regret it; all that mattered was that it had cheered Mel up.

"Okay, so we're done, right? Since it's getting late, I'm heading ba—"

"What are you saying, Kelvin-sama? It's not over yet."

"What do you mean?"

"That... That's right, honey. We haven't practiced the most crucial part yet."

Colette looked puzzled as if I was the one who had said something strange while Melfina was still blushing furiously. *Uh, what are the two of them saying? We just finished the ceremony.*

"Kelvin-sama and Mel-sama, please use my quarters and have your first ni—"

"Hold it right there! Anything else is not going to be mere practice anymore!" *It'd totally be the real thing! And even if we were to do it, why would it be in your room?!*

"Don't worry, Kelvin-sama! My room is entirely soundproof! No matter what you do, not a peep would leak out!"

"Why do you sound so proud of it?! And that's hardly the issue here!"

"Honey, if I'm not enough for you, then I wouldn't be against Colette joining..."

"I'd be honored to, Mel-sama!"

"AAAARRRGHHHH! Listen to me!"

I'd only just noticed it, but Mel was actually very nervous right now. There was no telling what she would do in this state—the memory of how she had destroyed Demon Lord Zel as a way of hiding her embarrassment was still fresh in my mind. And if the fanatical Oracle was to get involved as well, pure chaos was the only possible outcome.

“Mel-sama, it seems Kelvin-sama’s preferences lie elsewhere.”

“As I thought, I’m just not attractive enough...”

“There is no way that’s true! What he is protesting is heading to my chambers — Oh!”

“Wait, don’t tell me...”

The two started as if they had just had an epiphany and whirled to face me, asking in unison, “You want to do it *here*?!”

Please spare me already...

Chapter 2: The Tribulations of a King

The sky was dark, punctuated only by an eerie moon seemingly stained red by tears of blood. Roaring flames leaped between the mounds of corpses camouflaged among the heaps of rubble, hungrily devouring everything they touched.

“Why... Why did things end up this way?” a girl mumbled to herself in the middle of this hellish plateau. Red blood spilled in rivulets from her hands as large tears flowed from her eyes. She clutched a man who no longer moved and whose body bore multiple wounds so deep as to be fatal, bringing her lips to his forehead and praying with every fiber of her being. It did not matter whether it was a god or a demon who was listening—she was willing to cling to anyone as long as they were willing to save this man.

“Aha hah... This isn’t working. What point is there in me praying?”

A dry laugh escaped the girl’s lips. The entire time she had been praying, the man had continued bleeding. His vitality drained from him drop by precious drop, and she felt it all the more keenly for being in such close contact with him.

“He’s...beyond saving now. But can this truly be forgiven?”

The girl looked up and reached towards the sky as if to grab the red moon in her hands. This gesture might have seemed romantic in the right atmosphere, but not so here. The look on her beautiful face had gone beyond desperation to sheer insanity.

“I don’t want to regret anything ever again. I, I...”

The raised hand that blotted out the moon was clenched into a fist—a fist packed with all the hatred inside her, as tight as she was determined. Her nails dug into her skin, washing blood with blood.

“The deities will pay for this. The world will pay for this. I swear it.”

Behind the back of the girl casting the curse erupted wings so dark they seemed clad in darkness.



“That dream again...”

I slowly opened my eyes, registering the unfamiliar ceiling above as I pushed through the fog of sleep. A quick glance at the window revealed it was dark outside, meaning it was still the same night. I unthinkingly brought my hands to my face and realized they were sweating profusely. Not just my hands—I was sweating all over.

I’d been having this really weird dream more and more frequently as of late. The exact details continued to elude me, but I faintly remembered it involving a girl hugging a heavily wounded man among a lot of wildly dancing fires. The man’s face...I couldn’t recall. I normally just forget my dreams, but after seeing this specific one so many times, it had definitely left an impression on me. And I wasn’t sure, but I had the sense it was getting increasingly vivid and lasting for longer and longer. *Hmm...*

“Zzz...”

When I turned over, I found Melfina lying beside me half-naked, murmuring something in her sleep with a blissful look on her face. *Oh, that’s right. I did the deed. I went and did it.* “There’s no point crying over spilled milk” is a common saying, but in my case, I could possibly die due to my actions, so I couldn’t brush things off quite as easily. Who would kill me, you ask? Sera, for example. Or maybe Sera. And Sera, I guess. As for Ange...I wasn’t sure. I had a feeling that things would get sour fast if I was to make a mistake in handling the situation.

Let me clarify: the issue wasn’t because I slept with Melfina. Efil and Sera had already practically given their approval, and I had already proposed to her. The problem lay elsewhere. Oh, how much easier things would be if it was *only* Melfina I had spent the night with.

“Zzz...zzz...”

I looked to my other side and saw Colette sleeping on top of my arm. Colette, Deramis’s second most distinguished figure, Pope Philip’s beloved daughter, the Oracle upon whose shoulders rested the faith of all believers of the Holy Order of Rinne. Colette, the girl now sleeping...half-naked.

“Did... Did I royally screw up? Worst case, this could become an international dispute, right?”

In the end, I had acquiesced and gone to Colette’s room *only to talk*. In hindsight, I realized I should have been suspicious from the start. I had passed my Goddess’s Ring to Melfina because she’d said she needed to make alterations to it, but it was entirely unnatural for her to bring it up at that time. I had been so flustered that I had done as she’d asked.

Then, Colette had poured me a cup of water from the jug in the room in the most natural manner, saying, “You must be thirsty after the ceremony. Here, this should alleviate your discomfort.” Even though there was no ice in the jug, the liquid had been very chilled. And I had drunk it without a second thought. It was true that it was an indication of how much I now trusted Colette, but at the same time, it was another example of how I always let the ball drop at the most crucial moment.

“I never imagined the water was spiked with an aphrodisiac...”

Indeed, the water that Colette had prepared turned out to be a super powerful aphrodisiac. According to Analyze Eye later, she had made it herself. There really was no limit to what this fanatic would do for Mel’s sake—even ethics were no barrier. And I, having lost my protection against debuffs from the Goddess’s Ring, was left entirely at the mercy of her concoction.

In my defense, if it was a girl I had absolutely no interest in, I’m sure I would have been able to control myself. Unfortunately, approaching me was Mel, who loved me from the bottom of her heart, and Colette, who was fully devoted to me. As such, I couldn’t stop myself with my own will.

Frankly, all reason completely went out the window. My memory’s quite fuzzy halfway through, but I don’t think I’ll ever forget the look on the faces of both girls the moment I drank that water.



In the first place, what am I supposed to make of a goddess and saint who use aphrodisiacs? No normal person would go this far! Melfina is using an artificial body, so I'm not sure how things are for her, but it was definitely Colette's first time! As a saint, and as the Oracle, was this really acceptable? I want to shout from the rooftops, "Respect yourself more!" so badly!

Phew, I think that rant's helped me calm down a bit. Of course, I know Colette doesn't regret what happened—not a single bit. She does actually like me, albeit in a really convoluted way. But now I'm at a loss as to how to face her going forward.

"And here I was, thinking this sweat was because of the dream. I guess all three of us just fell asleep right after."

Colette's bed was more than large enough for three people to sleep comfortably in. The texture of her sheets was wonderful to the touch, and a single glance was enough to tell this bed was extremely expensive. However, the bedsheets were in an absolutely dismal state due to all the sweat. Yes, it was sweat. I swear, it was sweat!

"Just staying like this is hardly ideal, so I guess I should at least use Clean to—"

"Zzz...cleaning...out of the question...zzz..."

"Uh, are you awake, Colette?"

"Zzz..."

She's still asleep. What crazy things is she saying in her sleep? What, is this like guys talking about not wanting to wash their hands after getting a handshake with their favorite idol?

"Heh heh heh, honey..."

Thud!

I caught the backfist from the girl who had perfected the world's ultimate sleeping posture. Her sleep mumbling was unbelievably cute, but her tossing and turning was straight-up violence. *Ha ha, being by her side never gets boring.*

"Seconds, please..."

“Is she dreaming about food again?”

“I’m fine... Some more... More...”

Huh? Why did Danger Detection go off?

“Ah! Is this sense of foreboding a hint that she’ll eat a ridiculous amount of food tomorrow morning?!”

“Mm...heh heh heh...”

Oh man, I’m getting worried for Deramis’s food stores. Mel did get pretty exhausted facing Serge today, so the possibility of there being blowback tomorrow is extremely high. If push comes to shove, we might just have to get out the large monsters we put inside Clotho’s Storage as a counter-Melfina measure. She’s been picking up so many eating-related skills lately that I can’t help but worry.

I bit back a yawn. “I got worked up about something and now feel sleepy again. Guess I might as well go back to sleep...”

With a soft *pomf*, I threw myself back into bed. After all, there was no way to know how things would end up tomorrow until morning actually arrived. As such, the best thing I could do was fully recharge with plenty of sleep. *Back to sleep I go. I’m sure things will work out somehow. This was too much of a surprise to wake up to.*

And so I simply let my exhausted mind go, slipping back into the dark of sleep. All thoughts of my dream were already gone.



The next morning was a bit later than usual. We were now on the top floor of the Palace of Deramis, having breakfast with Pope Philip and Colette. Due to his circumstances, it was extremely rare for the pope to eat with other people, so he had been looking forward to this meal with us. The pool of people who knew his face was so limited, it didn’t even include the current Heroes.

This is a rather late hour for breakfast, though. Did he set the time in case we slept in due to being tired from what happened yesterday? Inside the dungeon, I mean! Don’t misunderstand!

“Mm, I knew it—eating with so many people is fun!” Philip chortled. “It’s, like, there’s so much energy at the table.”

Colette reminded him, “Your Holiness, remember that you are in Mel-sama’s presence. Please ensure that you show her no disrespect.”

And what Colette did to me wasn’t disrespectful? You went so far; I can’t back down from it anymore. Thanks to that, I feel like I have a stomach ulcer first thing in the morning. And why am I seated directly in front of the pope? I’m so scared I’ll give something away—I’m seriously counting on you, Nerves of Steel. Last night’s experience keeps popping back up in my mind. Philip’s childlike smile of innocence is dealing me so much mental damage right now. A mask. I must put on a mask. Put on that poker face, me!

“Eating in a palace is a pretty experience every once in a while,” Mel commented. “Efil, have you figured out their recipes yet?”

“Fully analyzed and memorized. No worries,” Efil said reassuringly.

And Colette, the Mel-sama you’re talking about is currently absorbed in eating. I don’t think she can hear anything, so I don’t think you have to worry.

Philip sighed. “Unfortunately, this title of ‘pope’ comes with quite a lot of restrictions. If I want to eat with someone, Colette and Sai are pretty much the only people I can ask. However, Colette is not always in Deramis—because of my appearance, she attends all diplomatic social events on my behalf. Eating alone feels so boring.”

“Food does taste better when you’re eating with someone else,” I agreed, then had a sudden thought. “Oh, but what about the ancient heroes who were revived the other day? You were party members with them, right?”

Speaking of which, the two had yet to be freed from Melfina’s magic—the chunks of ice that they were encased in had been left in a yard of the palace with good sunlight, guarded by holy knights. The weird looks that people working at the palace gave them while passing by had left a strong impression on me.

“You mean Ragat and Sorondil? Mm...it might be hard with them. Ragat rarely says anything anyway, and Sorondil pretty much only ever talks about women.

Honestly, the only people in our party who had any common sense were Sai and me.”

“I...see...” You know you’re implying that Hero Serge has no common sense, right?

“By the way, Kelvin,” Ange asked suddenly, “you weren’t in your room last night. Where’d you go?”

Sera looked up. “Oh, right, I was gonna ask that too! Efil-chan and I went to invite you to hang out with us, but you weren’t in!”

There’s the question!

Thanks to Colette deploying some secret spell passed down among the Oracles in the Great Cathedral, neither Ange nor Sera could sense where I had been. It wasn’t surprising at all for those two, who were so proficient at detection, to be curious about me seemingly falling off the map. If I did not evade their questions well, this would be the last day of my life. I exchanged a look with Colette for the briefest of moments to confirm that we would be doing this like we had discussed.

I also glanced at Melfina, but found her currently enjoying an entire platter of roasted teals. Clearly, she would not be of any help.

To have already won the goddess over by plying her with so much food first thing in the morning...this pope sure knows what he’s doing! All right, I’ve got no choice but to proceed without her. Thinking about it another way, since her mouth is so busy at the moment, I can expect her to not say anything that would ruin the plan.

“Well, you see...I was in Colette’s room last night,” I admitted sheepishly. “And boy, it sure was hard to catch some sleep.”

The noise at the table died down in a split second as a bristly atmosphere seemed to come crashing down. Although I would have enjoyed this sensation in the middle of a fight, it was something I could do without at this very moment.

“Eep!”

One of the servants fell over on her butt, all the blood having drained from her face. She was so terrified that she couldn't even move a finger, and I fully sympathized with her. Although she was one of those deemed proficient enough in battle to attend to the pope, we were talking about the pressure emanating from Empress and Assassin. It would be an even taller order asking her to not be affected. In fact, the only person who appeared entirely unaffected was Mel. *You sure have your priorities straight.*

Yes, I was aware that what I had said sounded like I was courting death—it was on purpose. See, I knew that any attempt to gloss things over would only sound like an excuse. I strongly suspected that even if I managed to get away by lying here, my lie would eventually be found out. In the first place, I did not have the speaking chops to deceive everyone. Consequently, I decided to be upfront about the fact that I had been with Colette last night, then rely on her exemplary ability at negotiation to cover everything up!

::Hold on, my king! What're you going to do about this air? I'm not going to back you up, all right? Even I can't do anything in this situation!::

Unfortunately, this was a tribulation that I had no choice but to weather. Thankfully, Colette did not wish harm on me or Melfina and was more than happy to cooperate.

"That's right." Colette smiled. "It had been so long since I got to spend time with my beloved Mel-sama and Kelvin-sama. There was so much I wanted to talk about that I ended up keeping them up quite late."

"Oh, Mel was there too?" Sera asked, the tension visibly leaving her shoulders.

Mel looked up in response to being called by name, a muffled "What?" coming through a mouth filled with food.

"Ah, so that's what it was." Ange laughed. "My mind just leaped to the strangest conclusions. I'm so silly sometimes."

Colette giggled elegantly. "I'm sorry as well for doing something that could be so easily misconstrued. However, I am Mel-sama's faithful adherent. I'm sorry, but I will always take her side in all matters."

Phew, the atmosphere at the table's gone back to normal. I'm so glad we got through it with nothing beyond a few cracked windows.

"That's a pity," Philip suddenly said. "And here I was, thinking that Colette's finally gotten a man in her life."

What are you saying, Your Holiness?!

"Your Holiness, please do not make such a joke with a straight face," Colette said scoldingly. "I am Mel-sama's and Kelvin-sama's servant. And that is enough for me."

"I wasn't joking, though. As your father, I'd prefer to not have to set you up for a political marriage. Think about it. This is the same man your beloved Mel-sama loves. Don't you feel fated to be with him? It'd make for such a dramatic story. Doesn't the thought excite you?"

Ah yes, a typical plot in soap operas. Which then invariably leads to absolute pandemonium.

"It...doesn't! Not at all!"

Hold on, you actually thought "Oh, that might actually be kinda nice" just now, didn't you?!

Rion, who was sitting next to me, tugged on my sleeve. ::Don't worry, Kel-nii. No matter how things turn out, I'll always be on your side!::

I looked back at her, teary-eyed. *Rion!*

My little sister's smile did wonders for my heart. It even seemed to be healing all the damage I had taken this morning. And the sight of Shutola looking confused throughout the whole conversation very much amplified the effect.

All in all, we had successfully glossed over things with Sera, Ange, and the pope. I didn't even have to lie; I just didn't expressly affirm what Colette had said. However, I did have one problem remaining: Efil was looking at me with a very hurt expression on her face.

As someone who looked after me practically twenty-four seven, Efil was capable of perfectly determining my condition and mood with a single look. In other words, as soon as she saw me in the morning, she could tell what time I'd

gone to sleep and how much I had exhausted myself. Given that, it was straight-out impossible to lie to her. Of course, she would never do anything retributive—she would simply keep what she knew inside her chest, even if the knowledge hurt her. She was not so much bothered by what I had done as she was by the fact that I was hiding it from her. In a way, that was what got to me the most.

Efil, do you have some time after this?

::For you, Master, always.::

I resolved to tell her everything from beginning to end, hiding nothing. I was ready to even prostrate myself in apology. I had no idea if I would be able to get her to understand, but I was willing to endure however many Blaze Arrows she wanted to shoot me with. *There's never a good reason to take aphrodisiacs.*

Suddenly, Cardinal Sai entered the room. “Excuse me.”

Philip looked up. “Oh! Did you come to join us for breakfast? Or are you here to check up on me after sensing what just—”

“I am here to report something, Your Holiness,” Sai said. Ignoring the disappointed expression on Philip’s face caused by his blunt rejection, the cardinal approached and whispered into the pope’s ear.

“What? The Rank S adventurer Sylvia is asking for authorization to come through our teleportation gate? You’re talking about Ice Princess, right?”

Your Holiness, there's no point in Cardinal Sai whispering in your ear if you're just gonna repeat the information out loud, although I imagine you did it on purpose!



When Colette placed her hand on the pedestal, the teleportation gate opened with a dazzling light, and four familiar figures emerged. Even though it hadn’t been that long since I’d seen them, a wave of nostalgia washed over me when I saw their silhouettes. I raised a hand in greeting.

The head of the procession, Sylvia, returned the gesture, saying, “Oh, it’s Kelvin.”

“Hey, it’s been a while,” I replied. *Hm? Has Sylvia always been sensitive to the*

cold?

Sylvia was wearing a long scarf around her neck even though it was a warm spring day in Deramis. In fact, the temperature was just right for a light outfit.

She used Ice Magic during our match, though. She didn't show any sign of being cold then. Or could it be that she just came from a really cold place?

"The fuck?! Kelvin's here?!" Nagua appeared next with loud, stomping footsteps. He was wearing what looked like a Native American outfit that left the top half of his body practically bare.

Okay, I'm sure even he wouldn't go traipsing around on a snowy mountain in such a getup no matter how tough he is and in spite of being a beastkin. I guess they aren't coming from a cold place after all.

"Nagua! Why do you always make it sound like you're picking a fight?" Ema scolded him before clutching her head. "Ughhh, I just remembered the scene from the tavern."

Kokudori chuckled. "That was a clean loss, all right. I made sure to sear it into my memory."

"Forget it! Forget it right now!" Nagua roared.

"Don't worry, Nagua," Ariel said as she walked past him. "Everyone has one or two shameful episodes in their past. In your case, one or two more isn't going to make much of a difference."

"That's right. You can do it if you try, Nagua," Sylvia added.

That last line from Sylvia served as the finishing blow, leaving Nagua completely frozen as if his mind had shut down.

Wow, talk about a blast from the past. I still remember when Nagua picked a fight with us at Clare-san's place and Sera took him out in a split second with a single—wait, I think it was four punches? He was trounced so badly that I couldn't help but feel a little bad for him even though he started it. I don't think I'll ever forget that incident.

As for everyone else, I'm glad to see they haven't changed a bit. Well, that's not quite true. I've no idea what they did on the Western Continent, but all their

levels have gone up. Nagua might even be able to put up a good fight against Touya now. What I'm most curious about is Sylvia and Ema—

Clutching my back, Shutola poked out her head from behind me and called out timorously, “Lunoir? Ashley?”

Nagua immediately whirled around in reaction to someone calling Sylvia and Ema by their real names. “What did you just say?!” he demanded, glaring at Shutola warily.

Oh, hey, he already bounced back. Impressive.

“Shutola?!”

“No way! Are you Shutola?!”

“Gah!”

Sadly for Nagua, his companions cared more about Shutola than him, and he was pushed aside without mercy. Kokudori and Ariel murmured, “Again?” and face-palmed from their positions at the back, indicating that this had been a frequent occurrence on the Western Continent.

“Huh? Shutola, did you shrink?”

“So cute.”

Oh, right. There's a lot for them to catch up on.

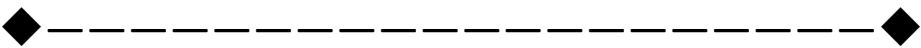




Both our groups headed to a parlor in the palace, where I shared what had happened in Trycen after Sylvia’s group had gone off, and Ema revealed what she and Sylvia had previously gone through.

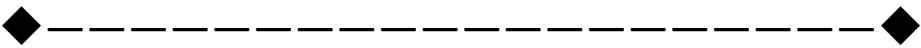
“That’s why we decided to leave Trycen. We were the General and Lieutenant General of the Magic Knight Order, you see. If we were upfront about wanting to leave, we’d definitely have been stopped. So we slipped away, taking care not to get caught.”

Ema didn’t mention Ellen by name, but she confirmed that she and Sylvia had indeed discarded their positions in Trycen to become adventures when the founder of the orphanage, who had been a mother figure to them, suddenly cut off contact. The following was the last message she sent:



My chronic condition has worsened, so I’m leaving the orphanage to focus on recuperating. I won’t be able to send any more letters. But don’t worry, I promise I’ll be back.

And now for some personal requests. Don’t look for me. And as much as possible, stay away from the Western Continent. I feel a little silly saying this to you two, with how big you’ve grown, but be good girls and wait for me. My heart is always with you. Lunoir and Ashley, be well.



As if this letter had been written in a hurry, the beautiful handwriting was somewhat messed up and only contained minimal information. Sister Ellen had clearly not thought it through properly. She said not to look for her and to stay away from the Western Continent, but despite her intention, it read as if she thought she would die soon and, despite receiving treatment somewhere on the Western Continent, chances of her recovery were slim. It was the kind of “don’t worry about me” that definitely made people worry. Little wonder Sylvia and Ema immediately set off in search of her. According to Ema, after they became adventurers, they spent the majority of their time on the Western Continent.

“Shutola...we’re sorry.”

The two girls lowered their heads in apology to Shutola, the guilt evident on their faces. The young girl looked back at them quietly, her face unreadable. There was no way for me to tell what she thought of the situation now that she had lost her memories. Did she hate her friends for their betrayal? Was she trying to forgive them? Or were her memories all jumbled from what Demon Lord Zel had done to her?

I could also see where Ema was coming from. Back then, Trycen still valued fighting strength above all else. If she and Sylvia had openly declared they would be leaving, there was no way the people around them would simply say, “Oh, okay. Sure.” That was doubly true for Sylvia who, as one of the country’s few generals, surely knew at least one or two pieces of highly confidential information. The pair had had a finger on the pulse of the atmosphere of the country at the time, and understood that in the worst case, they might have been assassinated for trying to quit. Even with the resources at her disposal as a general, Sylvia had been unable to track Ellen down, which left her no choice but to do it herself.

This was the full story of why the two had absconded and changed their names, turning into adventurers who roamed where they pleased.

“Lunoir, Ashley, please look at me,” Shutola said. When the two obliged, she continued. “As dearest brother Kelvin just said, my memory’s all scrambled. I feel like I was playing with you two only yesterday, but at the same time, I also feel the shock of your disappearances. It made me very sad and lonely. However...I have a feeling I would have tried to use you two in terrible ways that a good friend shouldn’t. So, um...would you like to be friends with me again?”

The little girl held out her two small hands as she looked up pleadingly with large drops of tears welling up in her blue eyes.

“That’s a question *we* should be asking *you*.”

“Of course we will. Would *you* be friends with *us* again?”

Sylvia and Ema each took one of Shutola’s hands gently and hugged it to their chests. Shutola flinched when they first touched her, but then the dams in her

eyes gave way. With a radiant smile, she said, “Sure!” and leaped across the table to hug the other two girls.

Colette watched on from the corner, her cheeks also wet with tears in a way that made her look like a real saint for once.



Since Shutola had managed to properly make up with Sylvia and Ema, I called for a break in order to give them some space to catch up, the warmth of witnessing their reunion still in my chest. I invited Colette to join us, but she turned me down with a smile that I had never seen her make before. It was such a beautiful smile that I almost doubted whether I was talking to the real Colette. Especially considering I had seen her make the exact opposite kind of smile just last night.

“However, if you order me to, I’d be more than happy to barge in!”

“Uh...”

The other smile that I saw the next moment left me at a loss for words again. *Stop it. Stop doing that heavy breathing thing.*

My takeaway was that there really wasn’t anything better for making up with someone than to just apologize sincerely. This was, in a way, a great opportunity for me. I could ride on this momentum and apologize to Efil myself.

As part of my mind looked at the fanatical smile that Colette was giving me while kneeling in a praying position, another train of thought under Parallel Processing made the decision to immediately enact what I had thought. Long story short, Efil immediately forgave me. In fact, she wasn’t even angry in the first place. As it turned out, the reason she had looked so pained was that I looked more tired than usual. Her sole worry had been my well-being.

“Cheating? All that matters to me is that you are happy, Master. While we’re on the topic, would you like me to make you dishes that will give you more vitality?”

Just how magnanimous are you, Efil-san?! Not only are you forgiving my cheating, you’re even offering to support it?! It’s making me worry for you instead! Not that I plan to ever cheat again. This time was an unfortunate one-

off, and depending on how you see it, I was the victim. Though I probably will have to take responsibility regardless.

However, this was where my actual problems began. That's right, my real tribulation had yet to begin. When I was apologizing to Efil, the super, super, *super* talented intelligence operator Ange managed to overhear it. And naturally, she passed the leaked intel to Sera.

"KEEEEELVIIIIIIIN!"

"Aha!"

"Hold on! We can talk this out like adults! We can reach an understanding!"

Sera cracked her knuckles as Ange quietly drew her dagger. I immediately prostrated myself with perfect form, but before I managed to obtain that pose of absolute protection, Sera grabbed my neck and dragged me off to one of the training halls used by the Holy Order of Knights. Living up to their status as the top military might of a superpower, their facilities were more than impressive. In terms of size, this training hall was probably the equal of the one beneath our house. It had already been cleared of people. With the stage set, my public execution began.

Ah, they really are going all out.

"Give! Up! Already!"

"Would you if you were in my position?!"

I maintained a sturdy Dual Helix Barrier around myself to protect myself from Sera's punches. At the same time, I tried to reason with her, but her sharp eyes had turned so red they appeared to be on fire. When I noticed, I almost took a step back. *Oh shiiiiit. She's dead serious!*

Naturally, Sera was clad in Blood Scrimmage. Her enlarged fists were fused together with Arondight in such a way that even the black gauntlets were stained bloodred, almost as if they were directly linked to her emotions.

Those terrifying hands were clawing at me, so I was desperately fending them off using my shield of wind. I wondered how we looked. Probably like someone trying to squish an apple—with the apple being me. Although Dual Helix Barrier

was straight-up shredding the surface of Sera's palms, she continued pressing down with unrelenting pressure, leaving me wordless with fright. The way her blood was flying all around me, carried by the wind, brought to mind an apple being peeled. Thank goodness I had gone with this barrier made of just wind and not a physical substance; if this had been Adamantite Rampart, it would have succumbed to Blood Dominion and crumpled at the first instant of contact. *Fine! I'll show you the backbone of an apple!*

In spite of my bravado, however, I knew I was in a very bad situation. Sera's hands on the outside of my barrier were indeed a threat, but the true issue was that, upon deploying the barrier, I was now rooted in place. Why was that an issue? Well—

"Gotcha!"

"No, you didn't!"

The crazy wind speeds and all the blood flying in my general vicinity clearly did nothing to discourage Ange from charging in. She slipped through my wind barrier like it wasn't there and swung the dagger in her hand in one swift stroke. Thankfully, I could see her location on the map in my mind thanks to the two of us being in the same party. As such, even at her top speed—that is, when she wasn't buffed with Sonic Acceleration—she couldn't entirely catch me by surprise. I calmly parried her attack with Black Sword Aklama while still paying attention to Sera through Parallel Processing.

"Kelvin! How could you lay your hands on someone else before even me, your lover?!"

"As I keep saying, you're misunderstanding!"

Right, Uncontainable had proved super useful in the fight against Estoria. I get it; I get it already. So stop persistently targeting my neck. You have a dagger and I have a longsword—I clearly can't match the speed of your attacks! You've actually been nicking skin for a while now!

"Dual Cleft Detonation!"

Understanding that time wasn't on my side, I made the ground within the barrier explode, causing Sera's hands to float up and lose contact with Helix

Barrier for a split second. It was only the smallest opportunity, but I would die if I didn't seize it. With Sonic Acceleration at full blast, I stepped back at top speed, breaking the engagement. *You two seriously are bad at listening to people talk.*

"Mel-nee, shouldn't we stop them?"

"Well, I was kind of involved with how it started, so I do want to help, but...look at how much fun he seems to be having. I'd feel bad to interrupt."

"Ah, that's how you see it too? Despite what he's saying, the corners of Kelvin's mouth are always honest."

Upon hearing the conversation between Mel and Rion in the distance, I reached up to touch both sides of my mouth. Sure enough, they were drawn all the way up. *Yep, I know. It's really inappropriate to say this, but I'm actually having so much fun right now!*

"Sera-san, we can't continue like this! It doesn't count as a punishment if Kelvin's enjoying it! This is more like a reward for him!"

"This is a problem, all right. When I see him smiling so cheerfully, I unconsciously go easy on him."

"Wait, *that's* what you're concerned about?!"

Just saying, I would never cheat just to earn myself this punishment. What I seek is a straightforward match free of any emotional baggage. I'm not actually enjoying this! I swear I'm not! But let's continue for a while longer!



Ten minutes later, Sera and Ange were standing straight with radiant smiles on their faces as I lay at their feet, completely beaten to a pulp. One versus two was too much for me to handle after all.

"All things aside, I feel pretty refreshed now!"

"It was a good workout, that's for sure. But you really surprised me at the start, Sera-san. You were really serious, weren't you? Of course, I understand why you'd be mad."

"I wasn't actually angry. It's just that I've always wanted to try doing this. I

once learned about the phrase ‘they’re on close enough terms to fight’ in a book. So I wanted to try putting it into practice!”

“So you mean...”

“After getting through a fight with him, we’re now even closer to Kelvin than before!”

“Really?! Yay!”

The two of them exchanged a clean-sounding high five.

So, you just wanted to get closer to me? That’s actually really touching, and I can’t complain as a guy. But still...

“Now, honey, it’s my turn.”

“Then I’m next, Kel-nii!”

“Um, Master, if you still have time...”

Three more of my companions showed up, fully geared up. I couldn’t afford to continue lying here—this was what it meant to love all of them equally. I struggled to my feet while using White Magic to heal myself back up.



After back-to-back fights with everyone, I returned to the palace with Efil, Rion, and Colette. The rest had either gone to freshen themselves up in the baths or returned to the breakfast table. I won’t say who it was who did the second thing, but I’m sure you can guess. Considering how much time had passed, I thought it was about time for us to head back to where Shutola’s group was.

What a morning it’s been, getting burned, frozen, and slashed so many times at such an early hour. Is this what it means to constantly walk alongside death? Gosh, what an amazing way to start a day. I probably won’t be able to handle doing this every day, but once a week would be a pretty good idea, right? What, it wouldn’t?

“Kelvin-sama, perhaps you ought to moderate how much you get into your hobbies.”

“Pot calling the kettle black much, Colette? I’m honestly a bit shocked.”

I was cracking jokes, but I actually really appreciated how Colette had carefully healed me back up using her Healing Magic just now. All the debuffs I had suffered were also gone without a trace thanks to Rion, who had been holding my hand ever since we left the training hall with Absolute Purification fully activated, and Efil had replenished my depleted energy levels with rice balls, the ultimate dish to eat on the move. Consequently, there was nothing wrong with me at all; in fact, I was both in top condition and in top spirits!

Honestly, though, as long as I didn’t die, I could heal myself no matter how badly I got injured. And with Mel and Colette both on the scene, there was no cause for concern whatsoever. I did feel terrible about destroying the training hall, however. I didn’t expect it to be that flimsy—the stage at the Beast King Tournament had been a lot sturdier. Only now did I realize just how incredible Caesar’s work was. Of course, when we were done, I used Green Magic to reconstruct the training hall. It was even sturdier now, so the holy knights shouldn’t have any complaints. I was a good boy who knew how to clean up after myself.

“Ugh, it’s that degenerate Kelvin again...”

When we approached the room, we found Nagua leaning against the wall near the door. And for some reason, he dissed me the instant he saw me.

“That’s the first thing you say, dude? Really?”

Kokudori, who was also present, interjected. “Sorry ’bout that, Kelvin-san. This guy doesn’t really know tact, you see, so he always comes right out with what he’s thinking. It’s a problem that we’ve scratched our heads over many a night, I tell you.”

“Hah! I ain’t one with nothin’ to hide!”

“Ga hah hah! And as you see, he’s got quite the candid personality. Makes him really fun to tease!”

“If only he was as direct in matters of love.” Gerard, the third one in the group, sighed. “But again and again and again and again he takes the long way —”

“Shut it!”

These three sure are close. Wait a minute. I thought Kokudori helped smooth over what Nagua said, but he didn't actually, did he? In short, Nagua does think I'm a degenerate. What did I even do to get on his bad side?

Rion spoke up. “Our group just went to amuse ourselves, but were you guys waiting here this whole time?”

“Indeed!” Gerard nodded. “I figured there wasn't much meaning to me getting caught—getting in the way. Kokudori-dono and I were enjoying ourselves talking about Nagua.”

He rephrased that even faster than he moves in a fight.

“That we were,” Kokudori confirmed. “Gerard-dono is someone who really gets it. He's totally figured out how to handle Nagua.”

“Give me a break already, you two...”

Now that I took a better look, I realized that Nagua looked a lot more worn-out than he had when I last saw him around an hour ago.

I guess even after leveling up so much, he's still no match for Gerard in both fighting prowess and verbal jousting. Can't say I'm surprised. Even I'm racked by memories of being called War Poet every once in a while. In any case! If he wants to fight us, he's gotta start with one of the younger ones. Say, Shutola, maybe. When he works his way up, then we can talk!

Nagua clicked his tongue irritably. “Just saying, I was standing watch here to stop any intruders. Don't lump me in with you guys who're just here to pass the time.”

“Like who?” I asked curiously.

“No idea. But my instinct tells me there's someone here that I've got to watch out for.”

“That's a really specific thing for your instinct to tell you.” *Who are you, Sera? We're in the heart of the Palace of Deramis, which is itself in the heart of the capital. Where'd you find someone that dange—*

“Oh, it's Teacher! Good morning!”

“Fuck! You’re here, Touya?!”

Ah, I take back what I said. Here’s an automatic trouble generator in the form of a protagonist with his disposition as a protagonist on full blast. He’s even showing that dazzling smile that steals women’s hearts. Still, that was an interesting reaction from Nagua just now. Does he know Touya personally? He looks even more disgusted by Touya than me.

“Huh? Wha— Ohhhh! It’s Nagua-san! It’s been so long. It’s me! It’s Touya!”

“I know your name, you dunce. Don’t you dare come closer! Not one step! Don’t even think about it!”

“You’re so funny, Nagua-san. Oh, if you’re here, does that mean Teacher Sylvia is here too? Is she in that room?”

“You asshole! You doing this on purpose?!”

Touya walked straight up to the room as Nagua slowly backed away, rivulets of cold sweat running down his face as his hands inched towards his weapon. Wondering whether I should step in, I turned to look at Gerard and found him and Kokudori holding actual alcohol in their hands, watching the situation as entertainment. At least *they* were enjoying it.

“Hm? Did Touya just call Sylvia ‘Teacher’?”

Ahhh, both Touya’s and Sylvia’s groups went to the Western Continent. I guess it wouldn’t be strange for them to have bumped into each other. Then stuff probably happened, and just like that time with me, Sylvia ended up looking after them for a while. In all likelihood, part of that “stuff” included Touya messing up big time again and drawing in everyone around him.

“You! Stop! Fuck! STOP!”

Yep, judging by how unsettled Nagua is, there’s no doubt that’s what happened.

“Kel-nii, let’s help him.”

“I agree with Rion-sama, Master. I feel somewhat sorry for him.”

“Huh? Oh, uh, all right. I guess we should.” *Rion and Efil really are sweet. If anything, I’m more with Gerard on this; I kinda wanted to see how things would*

unfold for a while longer. Oh well. “Hey, Touya, where are Setsuna and the others? You all doing your own thing today?”

Nagua’s eyes lit up. “R-Right! Where’s Setsuna?! She’s the one who’s supposed to keep you in check, right?!”

Ah, so Setsuna had a tough time over on the Western Continent too. Poor girl.

“The three of them went downtown to go shopping. They bumped into an elven friend they hadn’t seen in a while and said they wanted a girls-only day. Oh! Was the elven friend Ariel-san?!”

Apparently, Ariel hadn’t fallen victim to Touya yet. This too was likely due to Setsuna’s quick thinking. But it led to someone else becoming a casualty here.

“They could’ve just told me.” Touya pouted a little. “I’d have said hi.”

“Well, well, I’m sure we’re all getting together later on. You can greet her then. And Sylvia and Ema are in the middle of something at the moment. Be patient and wait for her to come out.”

“Okay, Teacher.”

At least Touya’s Absolute Gospel wouldn’t activate when I was around. And from what I remembered, Sylvia’s Luck stat was pretty high too. The kind of thing that Nagua seemed so worried about shouldn’t occur that easily, but...

Colette leaned towards my ear. “Kelvin-sama, there’s something I have to tell you about Touya-sama.”

What? His Absolute Gospel’s been nullified for now. What else is there to say?

“His skills aside, Touya still manifests unimaginable luck sometimes.”

“What?”

“In the first place, if his luck was only due to his skill, I have methods of nullifying it too. However, he himself appears to have a disposition that brings him luck in various ways. Of course, the frequency of this occurring is much lower than when his skill is in effect, but when it does, it has a, um, strong tendency to involve those of the opposite gender.”

In other words, even without Absolute Gospel, Touya is a protagonist through

and through? And when Setsuna said Touya stopped causing trouble while at the beach in Toraj, she had meant “compared to usual.” That means...it was a good idea keeping a close watch on him that time!

“Touya-kun, can you step away from Efil and Rion, please? Step away right now.”

“Why’re you being so harsh on me too, Teacher?!”

For the first time, I found myself wishing to become Nagua’s ally. We were now in the same boat.



Likely due to the ruckus we were making, the door cracked open with Shutola’s cute face peeking through. After that, the remaining members of all of our groups showed up in quick succession as if we had agreed on a time. The parlor was too small to fit all of us, so we moved to a meeting room. For some reason, Pope Philip also joined us, albeit from behind a curtain that barely showed the silhouette of...not his form, but that of a standin who looked much bigger. Colette and Cardinal Sai stood on either side of the curtain to speak on his behalf.

There was a large semicircular table in the middle of the room facing the pope’s position. My group, Sylvia’s group, and the Heroes’ group all sat down, each in our own clusters. Holy knights stood on guard at the walls, spaced out regularly and looking very nervous. Captain Cliff was the only one who looked at ease. But then again, considering this was a gathering of Rank S adventurers and the Heroes of Deramis, whether we actually needed the protection was debatable—if anything, these knights were probably here more for the pope. Rather than the guards, though, I was more interested in the stone statue beside the pope’s curtain. I was pretty sure I had seen that same figure of a dragon and an angel fused together in the pope’s personal quarters.

When we were all settled, Sai kicked things off. “The pope says that you may feel free to use this meeting room as you please. However, he wishes to be present when you do.”

“If there’s anything you need, just say the word,” Colette added. “We will do our utmost to prepare it for you.”

“As the first topic,” Philip said, “‘Ice Princess’ Sylvia, wasn’t there something you wanted to ask Kelvin? Do you wanna do it here? Oh, I’ll just be spectating, so don’t mind me. Go on, take as long as you want!”

Those are some reassuring words from Sai and Colette. Wait, Philip himself is speaking? Then what was the point of preparing the adult silhouette and having Colette and Sai standing there?!

“Mm, I wanted to issue him a request as an adventurer,” Sylvia said in her usual tone. Unlike the knights, she wasn’t nervous in the slightest.

“A request for me? As in, a named request?”

“Mm. And I didn’t want to make it a big spectacle, so I came to ask you in person.”

I feel like it became a big spectacle the moment the pope got involved, but okay. Interesting; I never expected Sylvia to request me. I’d thought that, considering how strong her party members are, her group would be able to resolve anything by themselves. Even Rank S monsters aren’t all that difficult to take care of.

“What is that request, then?”

“Search and rescue.”

“Of?”

“Someone.”

We both fell silent.

Why do you look so confused?! I’m waiting for you to continue! Wait, that’s all the info you’re giving me?! Isn’t that a bit too little? I mean, I think I have an idea based on your past, but c’mon. Look, even Ema is clutching her head. Ah, she raised her hand. She couldn’t stand it any longer.

“Um, please allow me to elaborate. Even when we were on the Western Continent, we heard your name every so often. Killing the Demon Lord and securing the top spots in the Beast King Tournament are both incredible feats. Most importantly, you also beat Sylvia in your promotion exhibition match. In light of all this, we decided to ask you to help us search for a certain person.

We've already narrowed down the search radius to a degree, and we promise the reward will be worth your time."

"Who is it that you're looking for?"

"A woman named Ellen. She's the one I mentioned raised Sylvia and me, so I suppose you could say she's our mother. If you'd allow me to explain who sh—"

"As in, Sister Ellen, right?"

Sylvia's eyes widened in surprise. "How do you know her name?"

I shared how we had visited Lifil Orphanage and learned of its founder's identity. I also let Sylvia and Ema know that we knew their story of being picked up by Sister Ellen and raised in the orphanage.

"So you heard from Marigan. Makes sense." Sylvia nodded.

I smiled wryly. "You haven't met with her ever since you left to join the Trycenian army, right? Go pay her a visit when you can."

"You have a point," Ema agreed. "We'll find time to— Ah, sorry, I digress. So, we went to the Western Continent to look for our mother, Sister Ellen. And we successfully picked up her trail. However, where she went is a bit of a problem."

"Enough for Sylvia to come to me for help. It's that bad, huh?"

"I'm afraid so. To think our mother went to Abyssland..."

Wow, I guess coincidences really do occur. We were just about to head there ourselves. But damn, that mother of theirs sure gets around.

"Abyssland, also known as the home of the demons, is an extremely hostile place. It's said that the weakest inhabitants there are Rank C. Kelvin-san, if you would join us on our expedition, it would give us no small amount of reassuran—"

"Sure, I accept."

"As I'd feared. I'm aware that this is a lot to ask on short notice. However, it means a lot to— Wait, huh? Did you just say you accept?" The grave look on Ema's face gave way to astonishment. "Um, I haven't even gone into the details of the request and the specific reward yet. Are you sure about this, Kelvin-san?"

You're aware that we're asking you to go to Abyssland, right?"

"I heard you loud and clear, and it's no problem. We were just about to head there ourselves. It *is* what I think it is, right? A dreamland absolutely crawling with the most powerful and atrocious monsters? Damn, you guys have such good timing. There are so many places we were planning on stopping by too. I think we'll be able to help you cover quite a bit of ground."

After the Demon Lord died, the phenomenon of really powerful monsters suddenly popping up had declined drastically. With how peaceful things had gotten, we'd left Parth to stay in Gaun and Deramis for a while. But you get it, right? Considering how hard up I was, Abyssland sounded like the perfect place for me. There was no reason for me to say no.

"Uh, it's not a dreamland; it's literally hell..." Ema caught herself. "Sorry, I meant to say, we're glad for your help."

Sylvia bobbed her head. "Thank you. About the reward—"

"I don't need a reward!" I interrupted. "We're fellow adventurers, right? And we were going to end up on the same road anyway, so what's lending a hand here and there, right?"

"Kelvin-san, we would feel terrible asking you to go to such trouble for us without repaying you in some way. Please, let us at least pay you."

"I don't really need any more money, though."

I kept on refusing the reward as Ema kept insisting. Our conversation remained stuck in this loop for a while. In the end, I agreed that upon successfully finding Ellen, Sylvia and Ema would fight me to my heart's content as my reward.

I mean, I've no choice. It's out of my hands. Ema's saying she just has to repay me somehow. I don't want a reward, so I'm really compromising here. Sigh.

Then we moved on to the details regarding the request. Ema went over where they thought Ellen was, the source of their information, and how they had arrived at their conclusion. To summarize, they'd found eyewitness reports of Ellen visiting the huge library in the Academic City, Lumiest, on the Western Continent. She had been researching medicinal plants in the library, but the

texts she'd referenced all mentioned vegetation that grew solely within Abyssland. After this visit, she had returned to the Eastern Continent.

"There are two entrances to Abyssland. One is a massive waterfall in Toraj, located in an area considered taboo to step into, the Waterfall of Heaven and Hell; the other is at the peak of the huge volcano where the Fire Dragon King lives, the Fiery Mouth of Purgatory. Both of them more than live up to their nicknames as 'gates to hell.'"

Wait, what'd she just say?

"The last clue we found of mother was in Toraj. We thought she was there seeking passage to the Western Continent, but it turned out to be the opposite: she was spotted after coming back from the Western Continent. In all likelihood, she then headed straight for the Waterfall of Heaven and Hell. That place is under the jurisdiction of Toraj's guardian dragon, the Water Dragon King. Luckily, Sylvia and the Water Dragon King have met before; we should be able to travel in relative safety. So, we're thinking of going by the Waterfall—"

I raised a hand even though Ema was mid-explanation. "May I?"

"What's the matter, Kelvin-san?"

"Sorry, I changed my mind. We'll be going through the Fiery Mouth of Purgatory."



"No one forgot anything, right?"

"We're good!"

"I have Georgios!"

"Aha hah, it would be a pretty big deal forgetting Georgios."

My party was a jumble of conversation as we prepared ourselves to head out, gathered as we were on a large balcony of the palace. Then again, most of our luggage was usually inside Clotho's Storage, so it took us no time at all to get ready. The only issue was that Dahak had yet to show up—pretty much whenever there was a spare moment, he would disappear somewhere. He did reply through telepathy that he'd be back soon, so at least I knew there was no

need to look for him. He'd probably just pop up sooner or later.

"Mel-sama, Kelvin-sama, everyone, I bid you godspeed."

"You stay well, Colette."

"Thank you, Kelvin-sama! Don't worry, I've already received a lifetime's worth of happiness from you!"

"You mustn't get conceited, Colette. Life is best enjoyed by regularly taking breaks and treating yourself. Continue developing your character and be accepting and patient with others. If you do so, we just might meet again."

"Noooo, Mel-sama, you're giving me a nosebleed!"

You're not doing a good job of making us not worry about you, Colette.

Suddenly, Ema burst through the door in a fluster, with Sylvia and the Heroes in tow. "Wait a moment, Kelvin-san! Are you really going through the Fiery Mouth of Purgatory?!"

Since my group had suddenly stood up and left the room immediately after I declared we were going our own way, everyone else was completely bewildered. Colette, who never doubted what Mel and I did, was the only one who had followed us out as the rest stared in stunned silence.

Oh, right. Pope Philip had also reacted in time. His silhouette had waved a hand as he said, "Come play again!" making me think, *What, are we friends now?*

I turned back to Ema and Sylvia, scratching my head. "Sorry, we have our reasons. This is something that we're gonna have to prioritize."

"I see. Pity."

"You're giving up too easily, Sylvia! Kelvin-san, please! I'm begging you!"

Ema bowed deeply in entreaty. I did want to help Sylvia out where I could, and the promise of fighting her and Ema as a reward really was tempting. In fact, I was even willing to risk my life for it. But—and this was a big "but"—I had to have my priorities straight.

"Master, if you are doing this on my behalf, there's no need to."

“Nuh-uh. We must.”

No matter how kind Efil was, this was something I wouldn't budge on. However, it was true that leaving so suddenly might sour things later on. I had accepted their request for a brief moment, after all.

Hmm, is there anything I can do?

Touya spoke up. “Teacher Kelvin, do you want us to go in your place?”

I studied him and his group. “You guys would do that?”

“We caused a fair bit of trouble for Sylvia-san and her companions,” Setsuna explained. “This would be a chance for us to redeem ourselves.”

Nana clenched a fist. “We're now strong enough to be of proper help!”

“I'll get better and prove myself as the better silver-haired mysterious character,” Miyabi said, being the only person on a different tangent, as usual.

If Nagua had been there—he hadn't followed us out to the balcony—he would have probably screamed at Touya's suggestion, but it was true that the Heroes were now much more powerful than before. They had even received some very effective mental fortitude training from Sera, so I imagined they at least wouldn't get in the way of Sylvia's group. Setsuna might have to put in some overtime again, but with her around, there shouldn't be that many incidents. *I think?*

“I see. Well, let us give you a different kind of support, then.”

I shot Melfina, who was still messing with Colette, a look. She seemed to pick up on my intentions and approached the Heroes, smiling. When she passed by, I asked, “Can you do it?”

“Of course. Now that I've received your blessing, there's nothing I cannot do!”

“I'm sorry, let's stop talking about that, please. Like, for real.”

The goddess stopped before the four teenagers and held her hands over each of them in turn, sending a faint white glow into the pendants at their necks.

“About those pendants I gave you guys before,” I said, “if anything happens, try charging them with MP. It'll let me know your general location. We'll look

for Ellen on our end too, but if you guys find her first, let us know through the pendant. If we find her, we'll also get in touch."

Those pendants also had the ability to generate a simple barrier in emergencies. However, it had clearly not kicked in at all throughout the Heroes' travels, meaning they had thankfully never been in such danger.

What? Oh, the practice match with Rion? I secretly disabled it that time. It's single use, so there's no point wasting it, right?

"Also, Setsuna, here's a parting gift." I reached into my robe to pull something out from Clotho's Storage and lobbed it at her.

"Whoa!" She caught and examined it. "Is this a katana?"

"Yep. It's yours to keep."

"This...is incredible. It feels so natural in my hand. Thank you so much, Kelvin-san!"

What I had given Setsuna was a Japanese katana that I had made myself. Its name was Nehanjakujou, a reference to the Buddhist concept of enlightenment leading to serenity. The instant the blade left the scabbard, its wielder could swing it two or three times faster than usual. I had made it during a period when I was really enamored with the idea of iai quickdraw, but I never took to it and the sword had been left inside Clotho's Storage ever since. None of my companions used iai in their fighting styles either, so I decided to give it to Setsuna, the MVP of the previous exam.



“Aww, that’s so nice.” Nana sighed wistfully.

“Teacher, you shouldn’t show favoritism.”

“Don’t call me ‘teacher’ only now, Miyabi. But...if you actually manage to surpass Sylvia, then I might consider making something for you too.”

“You said it!”

Good, the carrot-and-stick strategy seems to be working. I hope this keeps you motivated. Go and get stronger, Heroes! Mua ha ha ha!

“By the way, Teacher, if you’re heading to Faanis, do you want to go through the teleportation gate with me?” Touya offered. “It’d be much faster.”

I waved a hand. “Don’t worry about it; we’ll earn that authorization ourselves. However, I don’t want to shock Faanis by showing up out of the blue, so can you hop over to let the king know we’re coming?”

“Easy peasy. Consider it done.”

“Colette, could you let Touya use the teleportation gate here?”

When I turned to Colette, I found Sera and Rion fussing over her.

“Hmm, the nosebleed just isn’t stopping...”

“Colette, I’m gonna tap the back of your neck now.”

“I’ve heard that doesn’t actually help, Rion.”

“What? Really?”

Despite breathing through her mouth, Colette still gave me a firm thumbs-up.

“All right, looks like that’s a yes,” I told Touya.

Seeing that things were settled, Sylvia called out, “Kelvin.”

I looked her way. “Yeah?”

“Good luck,” she said, also giving me a thumbs-up.

“Uh...thank you. Good luck to you too.” *Did she just want to do the gesture?*

“Master, we should let Ellie and the others know that we won’t be back home yet,” Efil reminded me.

“Oh, you’re right. Considering we’ll be traveling through the Western Continent to reach Abyssland, we’ll probably be away for quite a while. Actually, you know what? Let’s stop by the house first.”

We’ll be going east when we’re supposed to be heading west, but the detour shouldn’t take that much time. Oh, right, is Dahak still—

“You the punk making light of my brother and sister Sera, huh?! Where the fuck did *you* crawl out from, you asshole?”

Ah, he’s here. But why is he picking a fight with Nagua right off the bat?

“Hah! You’ve never heard of me? Brutal Beast? You’re as ignorant as you look!”

“You two, please stop it,” Ariel begged, trying to separate the two.

Dahak and Nagua both had delinquent personalities, but the similarity was making them clash like the same pole on two magnets repelling each other.

Noticing Nagua’s appearance, Touya said, “Oh, Nagua-san! It’s been decided that I’ll be joining you to search for Ellen-san! I look forward to traveling with you!”

“Huh?” Nagua froze.

“Dude, you okay?” Dahak asked. “Hello? Hellooooooo?”

Ah, I think they might eventually get along.

“Are we really going to be okay?” Ema sighed. “Kelvin-san, would you at least consider taking a ship from Toraj? Wouldn’t flying all the way between continents be too demanding?”

“Don’t worry,” I replied. “If push comes to shove, we can just make an island of ice and rest there. Besides, she’s with us now. Right, new Light Dragon King?”

A giant magic circle appeared on the spacious balcony and a figure emerged.



A tremor ran through Faanis, the Country of Fire. Everything began when the Heroes of Deramis suddenly came through the teleportation gate. The return of the champions who had saved their country sent the palace into an uproar as

the king jumped for joy a bit too much for his age and his two daughters and other fans of Touya danced with ecstasy.

“Touya, welcome back!” the king said warmly. “I am most glad to see you fine and well!”

Touya smiled wryly. “I suppose it hasn’t been long enough to say ‘it’s been a while,’ but I am happy to see that you’re the same as ever, Your Majesty.”

The two princesses burst through the door, crying, “Oh, Esteemed Hero!”

In no time at all, the Heroes were surrounded by an entire crowd. It was an absolute racket, lively and raucous, happy smiles on the faces of everyone present. At least, until the Faanians heard what Touya had to say next.

“I... I am sorry, Touya. Would you mind repeating that, please?”

“Of course, Your Majesty. I said we’re here to let you know that my Teacher is coming to Faanis.”

“And that Teacher you’re talking about is...”

“A Rank S adventurer from the Eastern Continent, ‘Grim Reaper’ Kelvin Celsius.”

“What?!”

The king and his prime minister both fell silent as their celebratory mood suddenly dissipated. Their faces turned deathly pale as cold sweat trickled down their backs.

The change was so stark that the two princesses also became serious and asked worriedly, “What’s the matter, father?” They clearly did not understand the situation.

The question brought the king back to his senses with a start. “Prime minister! Get me the Adventurer’s Directory immediately! The latest edition, NOW!”

“Y-Yes, Your Majesty! At once!”

The prime minister sent a retainer scrambling off as the palace was filled with an uproar of a different nature. Indeed, this tumultuous day for Faanis had only just begun.

A heavy table was quickly carried into the room, and piles of documents were plunked on top. The king picked up one sheet and began scanning it with a grave look on his face, groaning, “Of all the Rank S adventurers, it just had to be Grim Reaper, the one infamous for being a battle junkie...”

The prime minister added, “He is young and has not been Rank S long—in fact, he’s the most recent to be promoted. However, he is by no means weak. He played a significant role in the Demon Lord incident and, with his companions, secured all the top spots in the traditional tournament known as the Beast King Festival, hosted annually in Gaun, a superpower on the Eastern Continent. Those companions of his are all rumored to be powerhouses in their own right. The most important point, however, is the commonly known fact that Kelvin is always ready to fight at the drop of a hat. He could turn into a huge threat for us if we mishandle this situation in any way.”

“Gather every last bit of information we can on him!” the king barked. “All civil servants have my permission to prioritize this over their other duties!”

“Immediately, Your Majesty!”

Men were sent to fetch the intellectuals of the country to attend this emergency meeting. At the same time, chairs were brought in for the Heroes to sit in as they suddenly found themselves asked to stay as material witnesses.

“Here you go.”

“Oh, thank you.”

Sweets and tea were promptly brought out and placed before them, perfectly demonstrating the thoughtfulness of the men of this country. The country might be facing a crisis, but they would not forget their hospitality.

“Father, what kind of joke is this?!”

“That’s right! It’s just an adventurer coming to Faanis, right? Why are you bothering the Esteemed Heroes about it?!”

“Silence! Being passionate about love is good and all, but you should put in some effort to understand the world too!”

“Whaaaaat...”

“What on...”

The King of Faanis then went on at length about how terrifying Rank S adventurers were. In so many words, they were walking catastrophes. The title signified a group of weirdos and eccentrics, every last one possessing strength beyond what was possible for the common person. Unlike the superpowers on the Eastern Continent, Faanis was but a midsize country, such that a visit from an individual of this importance was akin to a massive typhoon. Rank S adventurers had enough power at their disposal to easily trample over those with riches and absolute authority—they could overthrow or wipe out a smaller country if they felt like it. There were countless stories of countries blinded by their overwhelming strength who foolishly tried to beguile them but perished in the process.

“This is why all we can do is take every care not to incur their anger.”

The truth, however, despite the king making Rank S adventurers sound even more troublesome than monsters, was that there were no actual stories of countries that had fallen this way. The claim was basically a rumor from the past that had slowly ballooned over time until people started to believe it. Realistically, of course, there was a limit to how crazy these adventurers could be because they were all still beholden to the guild. That said, there was a whole lot of room to that limit.

“But the Esteemed Heroes are with us!”

“That’s right! They’ll protect us!”

The king seemed to have succeeded in painting Kelvin as a monster, so the princesses tried to justify their own views by bringing up the Heroes. For some reason, they were painting an image of the Heroes and Kelvin facing off.

“Isn’t that right, Esteemed Heroes? Nothing can beat you, can it?!”

“Um, well...” Nana blatantly averted her eyes.

Everyone’s attention turned to Setsuna. She sighed with furrowed brows as she always did, then said, “Unfortunately, even if the four of us fought together, we would never be able to beat Kelvin-san. We had a practice match with his younger sister, Rion-chan, the other day, and she completely wiped the floor

with us. Put simply, he and his group are on a totally different level.”

Setsuna’s tone was so certain that it left the princesses at a loss for words.
“That...can’t be...”

“Hold on, are you two okay?”

The twins staggered with uncertain steps until they eventually sat down on Touya’s lap, perfectly demonstrating the shrewdness of the women of this country. They were shocked, sure, but they weren’t going to let an opportunity slip by either.

“There you have it,” the king said to his children. “Even the Heroes that Goddess Melfina loves so much are by no means invincible. They are our champions and they have no equal in our minds, but we must not overly rely on their strength.”

Miyabi chimed in, “In the first place, Kelvin’s received even more love from the goddess than—”

Quick on the uptake as ever, Setsuna reached over to clap a hand over her friend’s mouth. “Okay, stop. Don’t complicate things.”



Touya eventually managed to escape from the princesses and return to Deramis with the rest of his party. Several days passed, during which the soldiers of Faanis underwent grueling training. They were now gathered in their training grounds once again, lined up in perfect order and fully wound up while waiting for the next words from the officer standing up front.

“What do we know about Efil-dono, Kelvin-dono’s slave?!”

“SHE IS HIS SLAVE BUT NOT A SLAVE! WE MUST TREAT HER AS A VIP!”

“Good. The story of the general from the great nation of Trycen who attempted to lay hands on her but was killed in the most gruesome manner is known throughout the lands. If you do not wish the same fate for yourselves, brand this lesson onto your hearts!”

“SIR, YES, SIR!”

“Next! What do we know about Sera-dono, Kelvin-dono’s lover?”

“NEVER LET HER NEAR ALCOHOL IF YOU DON’T WANT TO DIE!”

“Hold on! You there, you were a beat late! Do you want to die?!”

The training was grueling indeed.

“What is with this farce?”

“I heard it was father and the civil officials’ idea.”

The princesses were at a loss as to how to react to the sight, but the soldiers were dead serious.

“This is very important training, Your Highnesses,” the prime minister replied. To no one’s surprise, he had been among those who had developed the training schedule.

Suddenly, a messenger burst onto the scene, out of breath. “Your Highnesses! Prime minister! Urgent news! ‘Grim Reaper’ Kelvin and his retinue have been spotted approaching rapidly from the east!”

The minister’s head shot up. “So they’re finally here! Inform His Majesty right now! Raise the alert level of the city and let the citizens know the day has come! I’ll go receive Kelvin-dono in person!”

He whirled around with his cape flapping behind him, his bald head perfectly catching the sun. The ranks of soldiers following behind all emanated the resolve of men heading to battle and stood tall as if to bear the dignity of their nation on their shoulders.



“Is this it?” the prime minister asked, looking down at a harbor on the eastern coast of Faanis from a high vantage point.

“Yes, m’lord,” the soldier who served as his guide replied. “According to the information the Esteemed Heroes gave us, Kelvin-dono’s party should be arriving on this part of the coast.”

All the ships had been moved to the sides so as to clear a path down the middle, and the soldiers selected for the greeting were already in formation. The minister sighed with relief upon seeing them display the results of their extraordinary training from the past few days.

“Oh? You’re here too, prime minister?”

“Your Majesty?! Why are you here?! It is too dangerous out here on the front lines!”

The king shook his head, resignation on his face. “Against Grim Reaper, does it really make a difference where I am? If I, the king, come out to welcome him personally, it would at least put him in a good mood, right?”

“However...” Seeing that his king’s will was resolute, the prime minister also shored up his resolve. “No, it is as you say. I too shall prepare myself for the worst.”

“Is that them on the horizon?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. That should be the ship they are riding in.”

There was a tiny black dot barely visible on the line dividing the sea and sky. The soldier on lookout who had first spotted it—after keeping an unending vigil the past few days—must have had very sharp eyes indeed. Even now, the dot was so small that normal people would only notice it if it was pointed out to them and they looked really hard.

“We have intel that the Queen of Toraj invited Kelvin-dono to enter her service numerous times, but he turned her down every time. It would not be surprising for her to yield him a ship or two if he asked.”

“Hold on. Toraj may be a superpower, but she solicited him not once but *multiple* times? Is she sane? This is Grim Reaper we’re talking about, right? That’s like trying to bring a bomb that might go off at any moment into your own house.”

“It’s said that Tsubaki-sama is passionate about soliciting talented individuals. Unfortunately, I do not presume to know whether she approached Kelvin-dono in full knowledge of the risk. Perhaps the superpowers see things differently from us.”

In all likelihood, the queen had not given a single thought to what these two men were worried about. However, separated as they were across continents, there was no way for them to know what she was actually thinking.

“You sure are calm about this. By the way, prime minister...”

“Yes, Your Majesty?”

The king pointed at the sea. “Is the ship floating above the water?”

“I’m sorry?”

The minister turned back and squinted really hard. Sure enough, the black speck that had been on the horizon did seem to have climbed a little higher.

“It...does appear to be floating, Your Majesty.”

“So my eyes were not deceiving me. And prime minister...”

“Yes, Your Majesty?”

“Did the ship split into three?”

Once again, the minister turned back and squinted really hard. Sure enough, there were now three forms too big to be called specks above the surface of the ocean. There was no mistaking it.

“Did...Toraj lend Kelvin-dono three ships? As expected of a superpower. To think their newest ships are capable of flying...”

“Prime Minister, you must not turn your eyes away from reality. If those of us in power do not maintain a grip, our country will not see tomorrow.”

“M-My deepest apologies. By the way, Your Majesty...”

“What is it?”

“Are the ships not too large?”

“What?”

The king turned back and squinted. The forms that had been too small to make out before were now close enough to be seen in further detail. They were traveling faster than expected. As in, much, much faster. The two men had expected a midsize vessel, but they now found themselves looking at something way larger and, more importantly, not shaped like ships.

“That...is large.”

“I concur.”

Suddenly, the city's alarm bells started clanging. The monster that the Heroes of Deramis had supposedly struck down came back to everyone's mind, leaving them feeling shaken.

"They're far too large. They do not appear to be ships."

"Your Majesty, we must not turn our eyes away from reality. Every minute, every second is crucial to the future of our country."

The alarm bells going off was not part of the plan. It was a foolish thing to do, something that needed to be stopped immediately. However, even though the two men understood this in their heads, there was something they had to do first.

"That...is indeed so, Minister. However, there is one thing I need to say."

"What a coincidence, Your Majesty. I believe I have the same thought."

The duo inhaled deeply, held it for a second, then shouted at the top of their lungs, "THEY'RE ALL DRAGONS!"

Their resolve had apparently been insufficient.



The coast of Faanis shuddered each time one of the three dragons landed, with the tremors being severe enough to pass for actual quakes.

Maybe I shouldn't have come here after all, the King of Faanis thought to himself.

The first one to land was a jet-black dragon. It spread its formidable wings to adjust its momentum, then roared with the dignity of a king. Despite having already evacuated to a safe distance, the nearby soldiers thought they would get blown away like so many leaves in the wind from its roar alone.

Next was a rock dragon that seemed as enormous as a mountain. Due to the rough way it landed, the quake it caused was especially violent, traveling all the way up the onlookers' feet and bodies to shake their very hearts. It was a complete mystery how something that looked so heavy managed to fly, but it had indeed come there by doing just that.

The last dragon grabbed the majority of their attention. It was significantly

larger than the black one, with blue lines faintly pulsating down the length of its pale lavender body and a horn bearing a different color crowning each of its three heads. Even without making a peep, its poise made it clear that it was in a league of its own. Something about it seemed superior to the other two somehow.

On the back of each dragon were humanoid figures, with a man in a black robe perched up front on the three-headed one. The others made no move to dismount, as if they were waiting for the black-robed man to do so first.

“W-We’re under attack by dragons again?!”

“Calm down! Look at the crest on the cloth tied to the dragons’ feet! That’s the crest of House Celsius. Did you not commit it to memory a few days ago?!”

“Oh, you’re right. The blue briars indicate the intention of never letting a target they set eyes on free, and the center is a grim reaper who harvests the souls of those who attempt to lay hands on his belongings, right? Wh-What a terrifying crest it is...”

“Is it just me or do these three dragons look even stronger than the red one the Heroes defeated?”

“Grim Reaper’s a Summoner, right? That must mean those dragons are his Followers. You can work out the rest, can’t you?”

“The red dragon was an ancient dragon, right?”

“Well...you can work out the rest, *right?*”

In the midst of the commotion among the soldiers, movement could be seen on the back of the three-headed dragon. A maid who looked entirely out of place in this situation had stood up and was approaching the black-robed man. He was still sitting entirely still.

“Master, Master,” the maid said, placing a hand on the man’s shoulder.

“Mmm...what?”

“We have arrived in Faanis.”

“Oh. I must have fallen asleep after pulling that all-nighter.” The man raised one arm in a stretch and let out a huge yawn towards the sky.

Many of the spectators thought, *HE WAS ASLEEP?!* but had the presence of mind not to say it out loud.

“My liege, can you *not* smith on my back?”

“I kinda got in the mood for it. Oh, you’re right, Efil. We’re here.”

The young female voice coming from the three-headed dragon raised a few eyebrows, but almost everyone’s attention was focused on the black-robed man who leaped off its back faster than the eye could see. The rest had apparently been waiting for him, as they now got off their own dragons. One of them was the maid from earlier.

The man looked around and said, “I am Kelvin Celsius. I believe the Heroes of Deramis have given you advance notice of my arrival. Thank you for the welcome. May I speak to whoever’s in charge here?”

Thinking that his refreshing and amicable smile was too good to be true, the soldiers all raised their vigilance another notch.

“W-Welcome to Faanis, Kelvin-dono. Please allow me to lead you to His Majesty.”

“Much appreciated. By the way, would you happen to know where the volcano the Fire Dragon King lives in is?” Grim Reaper’s smile deepened a little.



Kelvin’s group was soon standing face-to-face with the King of Faanis in a lodging house temporarily set up at a high location overlooking the harbor. The king and his prime minister sat across a table from Kelvin and Efil, who had won the honor of the role through rock paper scissors.

“Welcome to our country, Kelvin-dono. We are a small nation with nothing of value, but please feel free to stay as long as you wish.”

“You’re too kind. I admit I was very surprised to get such a warm welcome despite the suddenness of our visit. Your hospitality for a mere adventurer such as myself honors me greatly.”

The king was doing his best to seem amiable, and Kelvin was displaying the model behavior of someone granted an audience with a king. Although this

conversation seemed peaceful and cordial, there was actually a fierce struggle to read each other's true thoughts happening below the surface.

He was surprised? the prime minister thought. *After going so far as to send the Heroes ahead to announce his visit? The way he's phrasing it... He really is considering making it a problem if something happens! Your Majesty, please do not let your guard down! Please be careful not to give him an opening to exploit!*

Honestly, I want to head to the volcano right away, but I guess we did just travel over the ocean, Kelvin thought. *Sera and Rion seemed really interested in this country too, so I guess it wouldn't be a bad idea to stay here for a few days. And in order to cover the costs for Mel's food...*

Correction: the struggle was one-way. Kelvin was simply using Parallel Processing to continue his banal conversation with the king and had no malice whatsoever.

"And I would hardly say your country has nothing, Your Majesty," he continued. "There is so much that would draw people here. I don't think you need to play it down at all." Kelvin meant every word of what he thought was high praise. *Like the Fire Dragon King and the path to Abyssland.*

"Is... Is that so? I suppose we do get told that often, ha ha ha." What do we have that would "draw people here"? And it's something a Rank S adventurer would be interested in? Oh! I get it now! He's targeting my precious daughters! We do know that Touya considers Kelvin-dono his teacher, and my daughters were quite aggressive in their advances on Touya. If he told Kelvin-dono after returning to Deramis... Yes, that perfectly explains why Kelvin-dono, who's famous as a philanderer, suddenly decided to come to Faanis! My daughters inherited my wife's beauty—I'm confident they are the equal of anyone else. However, I'm dead certain they'll cause an incident! Just like my wife, they're bound to create trouble of some kind! What can I do to get through this crisis?!

The king's exemplary intellect led him to jump to the wildest conclusion based on their brief conversation so far. He exchanged a look with his minister. The other man started, then nodded to indicate his understanding. He had caught everything that the king wanted to say.

“Just out of curiosity, do you have any plans going forward? I imagine you have a specific reason for making the trip all the way over from the Eastern Continent.”

“Ah, yes. Unfortunately, we have important business to get to, so I would like to head out again pretty much immediately, but...”

The unexpected response left the king and minister wanting to shout for joy, but they kept their cordial smiles in place.

“We have various preparations to make, so we’ll be staying here for three days.”

“Aha ha, of course, of course. It is an honor for our nation to have a famous adventurer staying with us.”

This was the moment Faanis’s sentence to three days of a mega typhoon was set in stone. The king responded with a convincing smile, but his stomach was hurting so much that he thought someone had sliced it open. He and the prime minister were too scared to even imagine what could happen in three days.

“In that case, we will arrange lodgings for—”

“Oh, we couldn’t trouble you, Your Majesty. The welcome alone was more than enough. You needn’t worry about us during our stay.”

“Ha ha ha! So, you are well versed in both battle and etiquette, Kelvin-dono!”

In this way, the king failed to direct Kelvin’s group to the inn his men had prepared beforehand. It was going to be much harder for him to keep tabs on what they were up to. For all he knew, they were planning on sneaking into the palace at night for an assassination job.

That possibility is actually pretty high! the two men thought in unison as they recalled what they had read in the latest version of the Adventurer’s Directory.

“Now, Your Majesty, we have to take our leave.”

“Very well. May Goddess Melfina’s protection be on you.”

“Oh, that’s right. We caught something in the ocean the other day. I hope you accept it as a sign of our friendship.”

“Oh? Is that so? Thank you.”

After Kelvin left, the King of Faanis found such a giant squid—already cleaned and prepared by Efil—lying on the beach that his knees gave out at the sight. Even through that experience, his head was only filled with thoughts of how he could hold his daughters back.



After the audience with the King of Faanis, my group went out into the city and booked an inn. Dahak and Mdofarak had transformed into their human forms, but I had Unsummoned Boga and returned him to my magic pool because he couldn't change shape yet.

“It was pretty wild how they welcomed us with the soldiers all lined up and stuff,” I was saying. “What a relief we brought a gift with us.”

“It was so cool that I felt I just had to reciprocate somehow,” Dahak agreed. “That’s why I gave them that roar. Getting to hear a dragon roaring at that distance is a pretty rare experience!”

“I’m sure word of your achievements has reached the Western Continent, Kelvinii,” Rion chimed in. “And maybe Secchan and the others even put in a good word for us.”

The king, the soldiers, and the people of this city all seem like such nice and earnest folks. Faanis is a good country. There’re lots of tropical fruits here too. When everything’s over, I’d totally be down for coming back here on a holiday.

“Master, I have finished tallying up how much food we would need to continue our trip. Here is the list.” Efil passed me a handwritten memo.

Hm? We already bought quite a lot before we set out, on top of which Sera did a whole lot of fishing along the way. Thankfully, we don’t have to worry about money, but when I see the actual numbers, it really illustrates what a challenge it is raising a Melfina. Of course, the one who has it hardest is probably Efil since she’s doing all the cooking.

“All right. Our first order of business is to go buy supplies!” I declared.

Shutola raised a hand. “Dearest brother, please let me!”

I looked at her in surprise. “What do you mean?”

“You need someone to buy supplies, right? I’ve never gone shopping by myself before. I want to give it a try!”

“Well, you are a princess, so I’m not surprised you’ve never had the opportunity. But there’s quite a lot on this list.” I showed Shutola the memo from Efil. The handwriting was very beautiful and easy to read, but the list did have multiple columns and asked for numbers that seemed sufficient to feed an entire army.

“I see. Okay, I’ve memorized it! And I have Clotho with me, so I don’t need to carry anything. Pretty please, dearest brother?”

Oh, right, Shutola wouldn’t even need to bring the shopping list.

I stroked my chin thoughtfully. “Well, I guess I can think of this as sending you on an errand. It would make for a good experience—”

“Please rethink, my king!” Gerard cried, leaping to his feet. “It is dangerous to let Shutola go out alone! At least allow me to accompany her!”

Yep, there it is. I knew he would protest.

Rion patted Gerard’s shoulder, making him sit back down. “Gramps, it wouldn’t be an errand, then. Don’t worry, I’ll go with her. You can trust me, right?”

“Hm? You will? That would be reassuring, but...”

Did this grandfather forget that Rion beat the Heroes all at once? How overprotective is he?

“All right, Mdo, since you’d fit right in, would you mind going with them too? Gerard, happy now?”

The girl a little taller than Rion with slightly droopy eyes, who had been reading a book in the corner, looked up with a bothered expression. *Ah, she’s got blue hair now.*

“If that’s an order, I’ll comply.”

“You have permission to pick up whatever fruits you like.”

The book slammed shut. “Let’s go now.”



After my dearest brother gave me the shopping money, I headed out with Rion and Mdofarak. This was my first time heading out on my own and buying something in person. My heart beat with excitement as I took in the unfamiliar scenery, which I had only heard about until now.

This emotion is called “being worked up,” right?

When we reached the commercial district, we found many stores in the form of open-air stalls selling colorful fruits and vegetables that were presumably local produce.

“There are so many stores!” Rion exclaimed. “It kinda reminds me of Gaun.”

Ah, I can see the similarities. It’s rare to see stalls like these in Trycen, where the merchants do business in stores set in actual buildings. From a sightseeing point of view, these might be easier to manage, so it would be interesting adopting them on a large scale. Of course, we’ll need to have measures in place to deal with illegal stalls, but if we do it well, it might help crack open Trycen’s insular culture a little.

“Then again, considering the temperament of the people, maybe a coliseum like what Gaun has would—”

“What was that about a coliseum, Shutola-chan?”

“Oh, it’s nothing, Rion-chan. Let’s hurry up with the shopping. There’s so much we have to buy!”

“Um, about that...it’s a bit embarrassing admitting this since I’m the one who offered to come along as chaperone, but I’ve just realized something.”

“What’s wrong, Rion-chan?”

“Aha ha, I don’t know the way. I have no idea what’s where in this city.” Rion scratched the back of her head, blushing furiously.

She’s so cuuuute! I really want to hug her and rub my face against her! Even though I’m smaller, I still can’t help feeling she’s just too cute. No, no, I have to put on a poker face. Like how dearest brother Kelvin always does! Poker face!

Hrm!

“Don’t worry, I’ve already memorized a map of this city, including all the back alleys and popular out-of-the-way stores. Just follow me!” I puffed out my chest proudly.

“Wooooow! As expected of Shutola-chan! You’re so well prepared!”

“Heh heh! Should I brag again about how I graduated at the top of my class with Colette-chan at Lumiest?” I puffed out my chest again.

Although I had lost my memories, after joining dearest brother’s party, bits and pieces had started coming back to me. They felt less like my own memories and more like pieces of knowledge I was remembering, but that was how I knew about Lumiest, which was far, far away from Trycen. Honestly, it felt weird having memories of an older version of myself.

No, instead of thinking like that, I should be glad that I have more drawers of information in my head.

Rion laughed sheepishly. “Mdo-chan reads books all the time, so I get the impression she’s good at studying too. I like visual arts like sculpting and painting, but math and English went totally over my head.”

Mdofarak, who had been quiet thus far, replied, “Not true. I’m still learning words.”

After Evolving into the Light Dragon King in Deramis, Mdofarak had gained the ability to transform into human form. When a dragon transformed, their appearance reflected their equivalent human age. A good comparison would be the concept of dog years—it was like a one-year-old dog being equal in age to a twenty-year-old human. Mdofarak was sixty-three years old, but that was very young for a dragon. Accordingly, her human form looked around twelve or thirteen years old and was extremely cute. Very cute. Of course, her dragon form was adorable too—I’d had a plushie made in absolute secrecy that I kept in my room.

“So you say, but you’re still learning things so much faster than me.” Rion clutched her head. “Ugh, I’m getting a headache just remembering how much I struggled when studying...”

When we became friends, she already knew how to read and write. Did she have a hard time before then?

“That’s only because reading is my hobby. I want to get to where I can read sister Efil’s recommenda— Wait, I’m only here as Rion-sama’s and Shutola-sama’s bodyguard. I wasn’t ordered to talk to them.”

“Aha hah, isn’t it a bit late to say that, Mdo-chan?”

“Looks like you really do love dearest sister Efil, Mdofarak.”

“Mm. My lips are sealed.”

Since Mdofarak had three heads as a dragon, she had three personalities in human form. They didn’t all appear at once. When one was out, the other two would be asleep. It was like having a split personality. Strangely enough, all three of her personalities fully shared their memories. The one currently with us was her blue-horned self. They weren’t drastically different, as they all came from the same dragon, but this one was more laid back than the rest, having a tendency to take things at her own pace. Her hair color reflected which head she currently was, and Efil had created matching outfits for each color. Since Mdofarak loved Efil very, very much, I recalled her being very happy when she had received the outfits.

“I mean, there’s no need to hide it. It’s just like how I love Kel-nii very much.”

“You’re too open about it, Rion-sama. You really should stop doing your morning greeting with him in front of other people.”

“Ah, I kinda agree with that.”

“Whaaaat?! Why?!”

Um, how am I supposed to answer that question? I think anyone would say the same. I really look up to Rion-chan because she’s super kind and makes friends with everyone so easily, but her common sense gets just a little bit weird when it comes to dearest brother Kelvin. Then again, dearest brother Kelvin accepts it like it’s normal, so it makes me wonder if I’m the one who’s wrong about what it’s like to be siblings. Umm...it’s true that esteemed brother Azgrad is quite strange too, but...I feel like I probably shouldn’t pursue this train of thought any further. As the saying goes, when in a village, do as the villagers do

—I guess this is just how things are done here. Wait! But then that means I'll have to do the same thing! Ahhhhhhh...

"Mdo-chan, do you remember what we have to buy?" Rion asked, interrupting my thoughts.

"Fruits."

"Oh, right, that's the reward you were promised."

Okay, I think I've calmed down. "Don't forget we have other things to pick up too. I'm sure that if we do the shopping well, everyone will praise us lots!"

Mdo perked up. "Will sister Efil be happy?"

"Oh, I'm sure!" Rion smiled. "She'll be super happy!"

"She might even make a cake with the fruits we bring back," I added.

Mdo thrust out a hand. "Rion-sama, give me the list please."

Yay, looks like Mdofarak's getting motivated too. And the store we're heading for is just up ahead. We'll be able to finish our shopping trip properly.

"Gosh, father and the prime minister are overreacting so much. I still don't get why they had to make such a big deal about all this."

"I know, right? It feels like we have to walk on eggshells in the castle now. And what's with father grounding us?! He didn't even give a reason!"

"He even stationed guards at our doors, and Touya-sama has gone home. Everything sucks now."

"Like, how can we *not* sneak outta the castle on a day like this, right?"

"I know, right?"

Hmm? There's a bit of a commotion in front of the store. Who's there?

"Oh, wow, it's a pair of twins. They really do look so alike!"

"Rion-sama, I'm basically a triplet. Even rarer."

"You know it's not a contest, right?"

Hold on, I think I recognize the back profiles of the two girls ahead. That tanned skin characteristic of Faanis, that strong-willed character, and the way

they seem like they're always together... Oh, yeah! If I remember right, it was back at Lumiest that...



Just as Shutola pulled out an answer from her vast knowledge base, the older twin with slightly longer hair, Ren, noticed her gaze.

“Wait, Ran...”

“What’s wrong, Ren?” asked the younger, Ran, who wore her amber hair short.

“Do you see that girl over there? She just met my eyes. For some reason, I feel like I’ve seen her before.”

“The one who looks like a blonde doll? I don’t think it’s even possible to forget meeting a girl who stands out so much. Aren’t you just overthi— Actually, no, hold on. I think I might have seen her before too. I feel like it’s really pulling at something at the back of my mind.”

“I know, right? Grrr, I’m pretty sure I know her from somewhere. But it’s not recent. It’s, like, years ago. Ugh, this is really bothering me! ARGH! O Esteemed Hero, please give me your wisdom!”

Ren clasped both hands together as if in prayer. Naturally, it was Touya she was praying to, but he unfortunately was not omnipotent. All he did was sneeze at the attention.

“But if it was years ago, that girl would’ve been a baby.”

“O Esteemed Hero, I beseech thee...”

“I really don’t think pretending to pray only at a time like this is gonna help you any. And if you do it so irreverently, Rinne adherents are gonna— AH!”

When Ran raised her voice, something like a light bulb—the universal indicator for an epiphany—seemed to appear over her head. This world did not have scientific things like light bulbs, so let us be clear: it was something *like* a light bulb.

“What, Ran?”

“Heh heh, I remember now. I got it!” Ran gave a little triumphant smirk.

“O Esteemed Hero, why?! You were supposed to give *me* your wisdom, not her!”

“Too bad, Ren. Don’t you remember father saying that we shouldn’t rely on the Hero for everything? Clearly, I’m more suitable as his partner.”

“Fine, you win this round. But that only makes us 324 to 324 in our matches for him. Wait, don’t distract me! What’d you remember?!”

“Oh, right. It came to me when I brought up Rinne. Remember when we were at Lumiest and there were these two geniuses in our year who were supposedly the smartest since the start of the school?”

“Huh? Oh...OHHHH!”

As the puzzle pieces fell into place, the frustration clouding Ren’s mind cleared away. Lumiest, also known as Academy City, was located on the Western Continent and was famous as one of the best educational institutions in the world. Its students naturally included the children of wealthy merchants and nobles, but the school was so prestigious that its curriculum was even considered necessary education for the children of some royal families. It offered instruction in a huge range of subjects ranging from fighting techniques—including magic and martial arts—to the arts, such as musical instruments, all held in a highly privileged environment with exceptional facilities. There were professional teachers for each major, and anything that a student would want was within arm’s reach.

In light of all this, being enrolled was an enormous feat. Out of everyone who passed the highly difficult entrance exam, only students the teachers acknowledged as having remarkable potential, those who could pay massive amounts of money, and those coming with recommendations from acclaimed individuals had any hope of entering. Ren and Ran had been among the select few who had made the cut, and they had graduated two years ago.

“One of the two was Colette Deramilius, the Oracle of Deramis from the Holy Order of Rinne. Everyone called her by the nickname ‘Silver Saint,’ remember? And going toe-to-toe with her was Shutola Trycen, princess of Trycen, that massive country on the Eastern Continent. And *her* nickname was Golden Sage

—”

“Right, I remember now! Shutola! She started in the same year as us even though she was so much younger but then started skipping grades with Colette and ended up graduating summa cum laude years before us! That girl over there looks just like her!”

“But the thing is...wouldn’t Shutola be seventeen or eighteen by now?”

“Who cares about the details?! Maybe she’s Shutola’s younger sister. Or maybe she’s a completely unrelated person—doesn’t matter! Ren, remember! Remember the shattered ambitions of our school days!”

Ran adopted a thinking pose. A few beats later, her face shot up in a way that seemed very similar to her father’s mannerisms.

“We had a plan, didn’t we? Uh...to enrapture the entire school as idols and split their adoration between the two of us, right?”

“Yep, and the Saint and Sage totally stole that from us. Their names always came up first no matter what the topic was. And they were always so close and always hung out together. They basically took all our characteristics but did everything better.”

“We talked about hogging all the spotlight by getting top grades in each subject, right?”

“They were in our year for only a short while, but trying to beat those two monsters in academics was impossible. Shutola was especially good at everything related to military tactical maneuvers, and Colette’s grasp of White Magic was through the roof. We did beat them in sports, though.”

“What about our plan to join the student council and control the school that way?”

“Oh yeah, that totally happened. To *them*. Right before graduating, they made history as the youngest-ever dual student council presidents. I couldn’t even laugh at the sight of other students several years older bowing to them obsequiously.”

“So we were foiled in every direction?!” Ren’s cry rang out hollowly.

Ran nodded. "That's right. It's not an exaggeration to say that our adolescence was practically stolen by those two. And now, a phantom of one of them is before our eyes. We wouldn't be Faanistan women if we just let this go!"

"Well...okay, I get what you're saying. What exactly do you have in mind?"

The women of Faanis were strong-minded and passionate. The moment a fire was lit in them, it became an ordeal and a half to quench it. This made them a great match for guys highly prone to worrying and who paid exceptional attention to detail, but things didn't always work out that way in real life.

"Do you even have to ask? We're gonna vent our frustration on her!"

With that, Ran started making her way over to Shutola at a brisk pace. Unfortunately, Faanistan women had a tendency to get passionate about things to the point of creating a huge fuss about it, even if their claims did not make logical sense.



Yeah, there's no mistaking it. They look a bit older than I remember them, but their characteristics are a perfect match. I've no idea why they look so worked up, though.

"Looks like they're arguing about something in front of the store. I wonder what happened?"

"Rion-sama, getting involved with these types of situations is unwise. Taking a break at the sweets stall next door is wise."

"You're saying that 'cus you want to eat there, right, Mdo-chan? Wait, pineapple shaved ice? They have shaved ice here because it's a tropical country? That, uh, does sound quite tempting..."

My two companions were drawn to the menu displayed at the stall beside the store. I wasn't sure if I should draw their attention back but decided to reach out through telepathy just in case.

::I'm sorry to interrupt, but there's something I think you two should know::

::Huh? Why telepathy, Shutola-chan? What's wrong?::

::Shutola-sama, the dishes might look delicious, but tempering your eagerness is wise.::

::That's not what I was gonna talk about! What I wanted to tell you is, the twins over there are this country's princesses.::

I then explained that the one who looked like she was thinking really hard about something was the older one, Ren Faanis, and that the other, who looked really worked up for some reason, was the younger one, Ran Faanis.

::How careless, wandering the streets without even a guard.::

::Ohhh, so Faanis's princesses are twins.::

Um...they don't seem very surprised.

::I mean, you're a princess too, Shutola-chan. I guess you've kinda helped us get used to being around one. And Goma-chan is a princess too, and Colette—::

::Rion-sama, Shutola-sama, those twins are heading our way.::

::What?::

::Huh?::

Just as Mdofarak said, the two girls were coming towards us with large, stomping steps.



Two figures peeked out from behind a corner a slight distance behind where Rion's group had stopped in their tracks.

"Oh, my grandchildren, what are you doing? The store is right there!"

"Gerard, dude, your appearance is really conspicuous, so pull your head back a bit more."

"You're the last one I want to hear that from, my king."

The two overprotective guardians clad in black from head to toe were currently carrying out a stealth mission.



"You girls over there, stop," Ran said.

The twin princesses of Faanis stood right in front of the store, blocking our way. Now that I had a better look at them, I realized that they were a bit taller than I remembered. And their chests had gotten a bit bigger. *Awww, that's so nice.*

"What can we do for you?" Rion asked.

"Are you thinking of shopping in this store?"

"Yes, we are."

I was really impressed by how Rion managed to maintain a friendly, level tone despite Ran speaking down to her in her high-handed attitude. By all appearances, it was a child standing up to an adult. *Rion-chan's so cool!*

"Hmph. I commend you for knowing about this store. It's not famous, but it sells a large variety of goods at very reasonable prices, so you can buy quite a lot of things even with a small allowance. And most of all, the old grandma who tends to it has bad eyes, so she won't make a fuss no matter who comes in! It's not an exaggeration to say that this place is practically our refuge."

"So we totally understand why you'd want to shop here, but we can't just let you pass. You're gonna have to have a match with us!"

Both Rion and I asked, "What match?" at the same time.

Uh...they were praising the place, and now they want a match? I know it's a tradition for the women of Faanis to fight over the men they want, but I don't think that applies here.

Deciding there was no other way than to ask them directly, I spoke up. "Um, I'm not sure I follow. What do you mean?"

"*You're* the reason, you root of all evil!" they replied in unison, pointing their fingers at me.

"What? Me?!"

What did I do? I racked my brain, but nothing came to mind. *Even at school, we never had any interaction beyond greeting each other. And of course, I'd never done anything that would make them hate me. In the first place, I hadn't stood out much. I don't think they even knew about me back then.*

“You know it’s rude to point at people, right?” Rion chided them.

“Ah, you’re right. Sorry about that.”

“Black-haired girl, thank you for reminding us.”

So...they’re apologizing for that? They don’t seem like bad people at heart.

“Okay, about the match. We basically just want to make you cry uncle.”

“Uncle.”

“Not you, blue-haired girl! We’re talking about blondie over there!”

“Huh? Um, u-un...uncle?”

“I mean, yes, but...no! Not like that! The way you did it while looking embarrassed was really cute, but the point isn’t to say it cutely!”

I did my best to say it, but I guess they aren’t gonna let us go that easily. I feel like they’ll make things more difficult for us if we don’t accept the match.

::We do have time, so what do you two think about accepting their challenge, Shutola-chan, Mdo-chan?::

::I don’t want to cause dearest brother any trouble with this getting any more out of hand, so I think that’s best. What about you, Mdofarak?::

::I’ll go with whatever you two choose. I’m just here as your bodyguard.::

After a quick discussion, we agreed to accept the princesses’ challenge. *I might not be able to do much, but I know I can rely on Rion-chan and Mdofarak. We should be okay.*

I looked at Ran and Ren. “Okay, we’ll have that match with you.”

“Wait, really?!” they exclaimed. Apparently, they hadn’t expected us to actually say yes.

“So, what’ll we be doing here? I don’t really like violence...”

“We might be Faanistan women, but even we wouldn’t raise our hands against children. It’s not like this is a match for the Esteemed Hero.”

“Esteemed Hero?”

“Ahem! Forget I said that. For the match... Ah! What do you think about

that?” Ren shot a look at the sweets stall that had caught Mdofarak’s attention earlier. “Let’s have a dessert-eating contest!”

“Huh?”



Oh no, oh no, oh no. We got swept along and approached the stall, but this match is very bad for us. To be clear, I think dessert is delicious and I love it very much, but an eating contest is very bad.

::Um...Rion-chan, do you think you can win this?::

::Aha hah...not really::

::I thought so. We both have really small appetites::

Yep, Rion and I were both low-key eaters. Part of that was because I always took small bites like a squirrel, making sure I took my time with my food. There was no denying that we were the most unsuitable members of our party for a challenge like this. On the other hand, I remembered Ren and Ran being known for eating more than average among the girls at school. At this rate, we wouldn’t be able to shop at the store, and we would fail at completing our errand.

::But Shutola-chan, it’s not like we *have* to shop at this specific store, right?::

::Oh, that’s true::

In that case, I guess it doesn’t really matter if we lose. Let me pick somewhere else and plot a path to it. Hmm, the closest place—

::No worries, I will go::

::Mdofarak?::

Mdofarak waltzed up and sat down at one of the tables laid out in front of the stall for customers. Strangely enough, I thought I saw fire burning in her eyes even though she should only have been able to control water and ice when she had blue hair.

“Question: may I participate in this match?”

“Sure thing. We were ready to give you a handicap and do this two-on-three

from the start.”

“That is a relief to hear. I will participate on my own.”

The twins’ eyes widened. “What?!”

Rion also looked surprised. “Hold on, Mdo-chan...”

“No worries, I got this.”

What to do? Mdofarak looks really serious about this.

“That’s a bold claim. Are you sure? If you lose, blondie’s gonna have to pay for everything we eat here.”

“I said, no worries. No one can beat me when it comes to dessert.”

Wait, don’t suddenly add a new rule! And Mdofarak, why’re you provoking them?!

I checked my wallet, tears welling up in my eyes. “I hope I have enough of an allowance for this...”

Rion placed a hand on my shoulder and smiled at me. “Shutola-chan, if it comes to it, I’ll pay. Don’t worry.”

I’m so touched by Rion-chan’s kindness. But because I’m the one who accepted the match, I should take responsibility. Wait, how much does Mdofarak eat again? I only remember her stuffing her cheeks with snacks made by dearest sister Efil. When we eat together, though, dearest sister Mel always draws my attention, so I don’t think I’ve paid much attention to Mdofarak. And it hasn’t been that long since she was able to take human form either.

“Heh heh, you sure look confident. I’ve taken a liking to you. Boss, three pineapple shaved ices!”

“Um, Ran-sam— I mean, dear customer, it’s a bit late to say this, but these people—”

“Three pineapple shaved ices, now!”

“O-Of course. Right away!”

The stall owner’s face has been really pale for the past few minutes. I wonder why.

Soon, Ren and Ran were sitting across from Mdofarak. On the table between them were several large cups of finely shaved ice and diced-up pieces of pineapple topped with condensed milk and golden syrup that glowed in the sunlight.

“Now, everything is ready for the match. I’m asking for the last time, but are you sure about doing this alone? We’ll be deciding the winner based on which side has finished the most cups within the time limit.”

“Can I start now?”

“Heh heh, looks like we don’t have to worry. In that case...” Ran took a breath, then said in unison with her sister, “We’ll make you regret ever crossing paths with us!”

And with that, they began a match that did not—as far as I could tell—have any particular meaning.



“Did you find them?!”

“They weren’t in the wing I checked out. Do you really think they slipped out?”

The guards and servants of the palace were turning the building over in a frenzied search for Ren and Ran.

“Of all the times!” The king closed his eyes and clutched his head.

His two daughters slipped out frequently, so he had assigned more guards than usual to their door. However, the measure had proven more futile than he had thought. All of them reported having been knocked out before they even knew what was happening.

“To think that all the training they received at the academy would backfire in this way...”

“And they are now as strong as Rank B adventurers... Your Majesty, should we send search parties out into the city before anything happens?”

“Indeed. Gather men right away—”

“Reporting! Princess Ren and Princess Ran have been found!”

“What?!”

The moment the king was about to give out orders, a soldier rushed in bearing very welcome news. The prime minister sighed in relief as the king relaxed the tension in his shoulders.

“Well done. Well done indeed. So, where are they?”

“That’s, um...the guards at the front gate apparently found them lying outside.”

“You mean to say they were just on the ground in front of the palace gates?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. They are being brought over right now.”

A short while later, the two princesses were carried in by servants who were propping up their shoulders. They promptly collapsed to the ground.

“What?!”

The twins’ bellies were so swollen, they seemed about to burst at any moment. Clearly, they had eaten too much. Furthermore, their mouths and clothes were stained with condensed milk from when they had gotten carried away and added too much.

“We were too late. We were far too late!”

“The poor princesses. Your Majesty, this is obviously...”

“Indeed. That fiendish Grim Reaper has shown his true colors!”

The king’s words sent a commotion through the palace in a flash. The men of their country were up to another one of their massive misunderstandings yet again.



Gerard and I quickly made our way back to the inn ahead of Shutola’s group and headed straight for the tavern. When the waitress approached our table, we ordered celebratory drinks in large tankards.

What, drinking in broad daylight is unseemly? Shut up; today is a momentous day. When would we celebrate if not on a day like this?!

“Toasting to my little sisters’ successful first errand...”

“Toasting to my grandchildren’s successful first errand...”

The two of us raised our well-chilled drinks and said in unison, “CHEERS!” Our tankards bumped together with a nice *clack* and their contents were drained in a single swig.

This sure tastes heavenly! I’m not as zealous about drinking as Gerard is, but I always welcome this. It’s the ultimate tool for sharing excitement and joy.

“Now, why are you downing drinks at this time of day, Kelvin-kun?”

“Oh, hey, Ange. Listen to this! Rion and Shutola finished their errand, and it was a resounding success!”

“The story is one that will keep you on the edge of your seat! Lass, grab a chair! I was so moved, my eyes teared up!”

“Okay, I get it. Let’s calm down, all right? Ah, waitress, pineapple juice for me, please.”

Gerard and I proceeded to share what happened with Ange, our words tumbling over themselves. There was the long journey to the store. The appearance of the two witches who stood in their way. The intense battle that had ensued. Me desperately trying to hold back Gerard when he couldn’t bear watching any longer. Then the reverse happening. And so on and so forth.

“And here I was, wondering where you two had gone.” Ange sighed. “So, you were up to your usual silliness—”

“Master, we have just returned.”

Ah, we had gotten a bit too heated in our retelling. Before I knew it, Sera, Efil, and Mel had also arrived. Judging by the paper bags they were carrying, they had gone out to purchase the daily necessities for the girls. The goddess alone seemed to be carrying food, but I was sure my eyes were simply playing a trick on me. Being a girl, there was no way Mel was stuffing her face with food while the rest were carrying so much stuff.

“*Fwa, fah fah fah!*” Mel quickly swallowed everything in her mouth, then repeated, “Honey, tell me more about the battle!”

Catching on to which part of the story had caught her attention, I replied, “Sorry, I’m done.”

“But you can’t leave me hanging like this!” Mel cried, making a face that said the world was ending.

That’s definitely not a face a goddess should be making! And Mel, you’re already holding food in both hands. I tried to make myself see them as daily necessities, but it didn’t work. It’s clearly tropical fruits and a ton of meat.

Still, even though I’m used to Melfina’s appetite, Mdofarak surprised me. The way she beat the princesses straight on was nothing short of impressive. It was already remarkable how the twins with tanned skin downed five cups each despite suffering from severe brain freeze that had them clutching their heads every so often. Mdofarak, however, emptied three times that number with a straight face.

It’s true, of course, that her real form is that of a dragon. When in human form, she only needs to eat as much as a normal person would—she’s lately taken to eating in human form to “get the best experience.” However, she could eat enough to fill her dragon stomach if she chose to, and needless to say, it was a sight to behold. Blue-haired Mdofarak is also quite resistant to the cold, so I suppose this was not a fight she could lose. If it comes to sweets, can it be said that Mdofarak has an even bigger stomach than M— On second thought, nah.

Two cute voices suddenly called out, “We’re back!”

Ah, the champions have returned. Everyone, let’s greet them with the honor they’re due!

“I’m just... You’ve all grown so much!” A certain knight next to me burst into tears.

Okay, dude, that’s a bit too much.

Doing my best to keep a straight face, I said, “Welcome back. Did everything go well?”

“Mm!” Shutola beamed. “A lot happened, but we got everything we needed at a great price!”

“Mdo-chan was a huge help,” Rion added.

“Couldn’t be happier,” Mdofarak said with a nod.

I smiled. “Glad to hear it. You may now approach and climb onto my lap!”

“Kel-nii, are you already drunk?”

“Quite drunk, actually,” Ange replied. “Be careful about what he may do, Rion-chan and Shutola-chan!”

“Aha hah, I’m sure it’ll be fine, An-nee.”

“Mm! I’m not worried, dearest sister!”

Despite the warning, Rion and Shutola still trotted over and clambered onto my lap to assume their special seats.

Huh? My field of view is getting blurry. Did I catch Gerard’s illness? In any case, all I can do now is pat their heads with everything I’ve got!



As my two little sisters hummed happily to themselves, Ange cut in. “Kelvin, I’m sorry to interrupt when you seem so happy and moved to tears, but there’s something I think you should hear.”

Oh? That’s a serious look on her face. I might be slightly drunk, but I’ll be serious when listening. I’m not stopping my hands, though.

“Sure, go ahead. I’m listening.”

“Your face looks serious, but your aura’s anything but. Ah, whatever, I’ll continue. The king’s and soldiers’ attitudes from when we first arrived remained in my mind. So I sneaked into the palace just now.”

Don’t randomly sneak into another country’s most well-guarded place as if you’re taking a casual stroll. Then again, this is Ange we’re talking about, so there isn’t a chance in a billion of her getting caught.

“Ever since the princesses got back, the whole palace has been really mad about something. It’s like, they’d been really on guard against us from the start, but then their suspicions were somehow confirmed. That’s how it felt. To put it mildly, they don’t think very highly of us.”

“Ahh, no wonder I’m getting bad vibes from the palace,” Sera said. “It’s radiating a whole lot of hatred and desire for vengeance right now.”

Oh? So they both feel it?

“As expected of Sera-san!” Ange adopted a questioning look. “By the way, why’re you standing so far away?”

“For Kelvin’s sake!”

Rion and Shutola exchanged worried looks.

“Rion-chan, do you think it’s because we...”

“M-Maybe?”

As someone who had seen everything from start to finish, I wanted to reassure the two of them. Just as I was thinking about how to phrase it, however, Gerard shouted, “It is by no means what you two are thinking! You did nothing wrong!”

You're gonna just come out and say it like that? Look at them; they're so confused!

However, I did agree that it likely wasn't anything Rion's group had done. After the food battle, they had taken good care of the princesses and carefully brought them back to the castle. The bighearted store owner had been so impressed with Mdofarak's appetite that he had waived the bill, which meant the princesses had come out none the worse. *Seriously, nothing comes to mind.*

"Um, could it be that they did not like the king squid we presented to them?" Efil murmured fretfully.

That's even more impossible. Efil prepared it herself, completely removing all traces of its fishy smell and leaving it fresh from head to "toe." It was transformed into an ingredient that was nothing short of legendary—even foreigners who don't like sashimi because of the fishiness would have praised it to high heaven. And given how big it was, how many mouths do you think it could feed?

"Efil, there's no way that's the problem," I assured her. "Your preparation was so marvelous that Tsubaki-sama would have cried if you'd given it to her."

"Master!" Efil wiped away a tear of relief.

Hmm, that still leaves us with no idea what we did wrong. All I do know is that things will probably get bothersome if we stay in this city any longer. I haven't seen anyone around here who can help us, and we've already bought everything we need. I guess we can advance our schedule a little.

"All right, let's head straight to Abyssland, then."

No one objected, aside from the goddess who was a bit miffed about not getting to try all the cuisine in the city. With our next step decided, we hurried to make our preparations for setting out again. Remembering that I had to let the inn know we were canceling our stay, I made my way to the counter beside the tavern area.

"Sorry, I know we booked three nights, but we're heading out early. We'll pay the full fee, though." I placed the exact amount owed for my party on the counter.

“What?! But...sir! What did we do that was not to your liking?!”

“Nah, that’s not—”

“We beg you! Please give us another chance!”

For some reason, the innkeeper wailed and prostrated himself as I was trying to check out.

Chapter 3: Dragon King

Slightly inland from the southwest edge of the Country of Fire was a volcanic area dotted with active volcanoes of varying sizes spewing plumes of smoke into the sky as if about to erupt at any moment. The environment was harsh, but this mountainous volcanic area was also why Faanis had no fear of being invaded by its neighbors. As a country that relied on maritime trade for its prosperity, the Country of Fire simply viewed the volcanic area as a natural barrier. After all, no army would want to step foot inside the moment they learned its name.

“‘Nest of the Flame Dragon King,’ is it? That’s one fancy home he’s got there.”

Thanks to Cool Zone, the Rank B Blue Magic that Mel was casting, we were traveling in absolute comfort, but the temperature of the place was far beyond scorching. Lava flowed along the side of the road and clouds of ash and smoke obscured both the sun and the otherwise clear blue sky. The only source of illumination was the lava.

“Some of those peaks are actually erupting, aren’t they?” I noted. “Oddly enough, none of the damage seems to be going Faanis’s way.”

“Many factors, including the direction of the wind and the way the volcanoes are angled, are all working in miraculous harmony to ensure that everything goes the other way,” Shutola replied. “The path from Faanis is relatively safe, but trying to climb up from the side is basically impossible.”

“Boy, I sure don’t want to be the first to try!” Rion laughed.

Mel said suddenly, “By the way, Efil, I heard of a popular cooking method in Faanis called ‘lava rock grilling’! In fact, I saw places doing it with my own eyes!”

“It interested me greatly as well!” Efil gushed. “It supposedly delivers the heat deep inside the ingredient without burning it and—”

Despite everything I had just said about the environment, those of us in the back were casually chatting while walking along because we had nothing better

to do. Shutola was even reading a book on some complicated subject, perched on Georgios's shoulder so that it could do the walking for her. If not for Cool Zone, her book probably would have caught fire by now. Mel's spell made it so that the area around us was as comfortable as if we had an air conditioner on.

At the same time, the group up front, consisting of Gerard, Ange, and Sera, was clearing everything in our way.

"Sera-san, it went that way!"

"Got it!"

"Lass, *I'm* the tank! Don't leap out in front of me! You're stealing my spotlight!"

Gerard was staying just within the borders of the Cool Zone spell to protect the rest of us while Sera and Ange zealously hunted every monster that popped up ahead. Unsurprisingly, all the monsters had something to do with fire, some with bodies of flame instead of normal hides and some being birds and bats that looked like balls of fire. Anyone careless enough to approach them would definitely get burned. Although we were still close to the entrance, everything here was at least Rank B in strength, making the area completely inaccessible to most adventurers.

"Noooo, I was targeting that one!" Gerard cried, prompting rebuttals of "First come, first served!" from both Sera and Ange.

Of course, such terrifying monsters were nothing but moving targets that provided XP for my companions. *What, the heat? Come on, the temperature here is nothing but a match fire compared to Efil's flames.*

"Hmph! This one shall be mine!"

"Too slow!"

Sadly, a certain knight was trying to show off in front of his grandchildren but failing to get any of the action.

It's okay, Gerard. Rion is busy chatting and Shutola is absorbed in her book.

"A penny for your thoughts, brother? Or do you need some vitamins?"

"My liege, you are frowning deeply. Do you need more sugar?"

The Darkness Dragon King's son and the incumbent Light Dragon King offered me a vegetable stick and a doughnut stick, respectively. *I'm really happy that you're worrying about me, but shouldn't you two be eating a more dragon-like diet? Like, having meat...and more meat. I'm not telling you to learn from her, but look at Melfina-sensei. She eats everything without being picky.*

"Nah, it's nothing much," I replied. "Forget about me. Dahak, we didn't see you at all during our time in Faanis. Where'd you go?"

"Oh, me? I went out a bit farther to see if there were any interesting plants. As you can imagine, a climate like this tends to have pretty unique flora. I tried growing quite a few things on my scales to see what they were like. It's basically my hobby."

How many other dragons' first instinct when visiting a new place is to harvest local flora and plant it on their own scales? I think Dahak's probably the only one.

Of course, even though I made Dahak sound like a weirdo, there was a proper reason for his seemingly bizarre actions. His Unique Skill, Gemmation, gave him the ability to control vegetation however he wanted. In order to use it, he had to take seeds from the target species, grow them fully, harvest seeds from the resulting plants, and eat those seeds. As it happened, he also had Black Soil Scales as another Unique Skill, which made his scales the perfect seedbed for all this planting.

"As always, Dahak's eccentricity is beyond me."

"Don't say that, Mdo. Even he has reasons for his behavior. It's like a delinquent stopping to fuss over a tiny animal abandoned by the roadside. At times like this, you're supposed to just watch him with understanding eyes."

"Understood, my liege."

"Uh, can you two have that conversation out of earshot, please?"

After chiding the red-haired Mdo, who was wearing a red outfit, I cast my eyes towards our destination: the volcano that towered over all the others. At this rate, it was going to take us quite a long time to reach it. I enjoyed chilling and bantering with my companions while strolling along, but the rational battle

junkie part of me was feeling unsatisfied. Clearly, no help was needed for the monster fight that occasionally broke out ahead. The strength they had was already excessive.

“Hey, guys, what do you think about racing to the nest of the Flame Dragon King?”



Long story short, my silly idea ended up kicking off an impromptu race that we did in pairs chosen by drawing lots. It was actually a race in name only, and the real aim was to wipe out the monsters in our way at a faster pace, but when I suggested a reward to get everyone motivated, a fire lit up in the eyes of a few of my party members.

I’m gonna just take it easy myself, though.

“This reminds me of when we first met and we spent every day leveling up, Master.”

“And it was just the two of us all the time.”

“I treasure those memories very much.”

It felt like as of late, whenever we used luck to decide something—such as drawing lots to choose room assignments or splitting into groups—I ended up with Efil more often than not. *I hope I’m not being too self-conscious thinking it’s because she wishes for it and the Luck buff from Divine Restitution is making it happen. If that’s true, though, it... It honestly makes me pretty happy. I finally get some alone time with Efil, so I gotta make the most of it.*

“Sera and Ange are probably gonna win, right?”

“They did look very fired up, after all.”

On the flip side, Sera, who used to win all the time for things like these, had been on a bit of a losing streak. She wouldn’t protest the results, but because she had a pretty competitive personality, I heard she was doing secret training to improve her odds. I hadn’t the faintest idea what that training entailed, though.

“I understand how they feel, though, since you’re the one issuing the reward.

As for me...I simply want to treasure this time we have together.”

“Aw, Efil...”

After that, Efil and I held hands and had a lovely stroll. We exchanged meaningless banter, laughed about silly things, and enjoyed the warmth of each other’s hands. Unfortunately, the path wasn’t exactly romantic, what with the overbearing heat and adult fire dragons jumping out at us halfway, but we still had a wonderful time.

There is something I need to confirm now: what will we do with the Flame Dragon King—the one who killed Efil’s mother, Rumil?



“You’re late! You two are so late!”

When we reached the foot of the large volcano, we found Sera waiting for us with her hands on her hips. Judging by how miffed she was, we had made her wait quite a while. I looked around and realized that everyone else had arrived ahead of us. *Even though we were going a bit slow on purpose, maybe being dead last was a bit much.*

“Did you enjoy it, Efil-chan?” Ange asked somewhat teasingly, clearly having picked up on my intentions.

With a red face, Efil replied, “Um...yes, I did.”

Efil blushing is always easy on the eyes, but I wish Ange would be that considerate with me sometimes too.

“Sorry, we got a bit too into the hunting,” I said. “The route we were on happened to go directly through the nest of a bunch of fire dragons, so I ended up having a bit too much fun with Efil.”

“Oh, is that why? Well...okay, I guess you couldn’t help it, then! But it doesn’t change the fact that we won. We’ll be expecting a present filled with your feelings!”

With Sera placated, it was time to get to business. The massive volcano before our eyes, the namesake of this entire area, looked like a colossal dragon with its mouth wide open, constantly spewing lava into the sky like a Breath

Attack. Surprisingly, the mountain itself, which looked like a warped dragon's head, was entirely natural and not sculpted. Sometimes, nature works wonders indeed.

"The shape of the volcano is so interesting," Rion marveled. "That part over there even looks like a dragon's eye. You know what? This calls for a sketch."

"Wow, you're so good at drawing!" Shutola exclaimed. "And you're so fast!"

Oh, that's the picture diary that Rion started when Efil and I were teaching her how to write. Neither of us could stop talking about what a big difference there was between what she wrote and what she drew. The contents of her diary were entirely normal for someone of her age, but the drawings were so good, they were practically photos. Wait, I'm digressing again.

"If we get to the top of this volcano, the Fiery Mouth of Purgatory, and descend into it, we'll get to Abyssland, right?" I asked Melfina one last time just to be safe.

"To be exact, there is a gate there, sort of like a teleportation gate, that's connected to Abyssland. Unlike the teleportation gates managed by countries here, this one doesn't require authorization, so anyone can use it."

"You mean, anyone who actually makes it to the gate, right?"

Realistically, only someone hoping to commit suicide would leap into an active volcano with bubbling lava. And beyond all this danger was the fact that, just as its name indicated, this volcano was where the Flame Dragon King nested. Even the other fire dragons made sure not to approach the area. As *expected of the creature said to be the most belligerent and violent of all dragon kings.*

"Honey, if it was in an easily accessible location, there would be many more residents of Abyssland now aboveground."

"That's fair. The only demons I've ever met are Sera and Viktor." *Not counting Bell Baal, whom we still haven't confirmed is Sera's younger sister.*

"Incidentally, the Waterfall of Heaven and Hell that Sylvia's group is heading towards is equally treacherous," Melfina said.

“‘Equally’? I know Sylvia and Ema will be fine, but Touya worries me a little. Nagua too.”

“That said, the Waterfall of Heaven and Hell is the territory of the Water Dragon King. Sylvia supposedly knows him, so I think they will be fine.”

“Mel, that might be true in terms of physical abilities, but remember Touya’s disposition? What I’m worried about is Setsuna’s stress levels and Nagua’s distress. I’m sure there’s a lot happening on their side.”

“Ah, I understand what you mean now.” Melfina put her hands together as if in prayer. “May the wrinkles around Setsuna’s eyebrows not get any deeper!”

“Nagua, live strong!” Dahak cried, pumping a fist into the air.

I love how easy we have it not traveling with Touya. Hang in there, you lot! I’m a weak, powerless nobody who can’t do anything to help you, but I’m sending you my thoughts and prayers!

Seeing that the exchange was over, Ange said, “Changing the topic, but Kelvin, we probed the inside of the volcano, and the Flame Dragon King isn’t in right now.”

I looked at her disbelievingly. “Seriously?! We even hurried to pay him our respects!”

“You didn’t hurry at all, Kelvin!” Sera retorted. “Ange and I are the ones who did!”

“If you want to know, Shutola-chan and I came in second,” Rion said.

“Mm-hm!” Shutola smiled. “I was just reading my book inside Alex’s shadow the whole time. It was surprisingly comfortable!”

Mdo tugged my sleeve. “My liege, I came in third because Dahak was too slow. I request sweets made by sister Efil as recompense for his failings.”

Dahak made an exasperated noise. “Oh, get off my back already, squirt! How can I just let it go when there are so many rare flowers and plants around here?! It’s like a treasure trove! Oh, and if we’re making requests, I want more vegetable sticks, please.”

“Okay, I get how seriously you guys took it now.”

Each pair had approached the race in different ways. Sera and Ange, the hardcore group, had run and fought to the best of their abilities, plain and simple. Rion and Shutola had aimed for a strategic win, with Shutola staying inside Alex's shadow the whole time so that Rion could run at full speed. As for the dragons... Well, Dahak got to add to his repertoire, so that was a win too.

"So, that leaves... Wait, fourth place went to Mel and Gerard?"

"My king, I'm a full-body suit of armor."

"Honey, I'd just eaten."

The knight rubbed the back of his head as the goddess rubbed her stomach. *I feel like neither excuse really works here. I mean, I get that these two mainstays of my party have things they're good at and not so good at, but are they gonna be all right in Abyssland? Then again, I suppose that's not something for me, who came dead last, to say...*

Suddenly, a cute stomach growl sounded.

"C'mon Mel, you said you just ate—"

"I-It wasn't me, honey! I'm innocent!"

What? Then the other glutton—

"My liege, I am being framed. I don't need to eat as much when I am in human form."

"She's right. Brother, it wasn't from Mdo's stomach."

If it wasn't Mdo either... Well, I already know who it was judging by the direction the sound came from, but I just had to double-check in light of the usual culprits' track records.

I turned towards the two real culprits this time, Sera and Ange.

"Aha hah, I used a bit too much energy just now." Ange laughed sheepishly.

"This too is proof that we once again surpassed our limits!" Sera declared as if putting on a front before immediately deflating and rubbing her stomach. "I'm hungry, Kelvin."

Just how hard did you push yourselves?!

“Well...it *is* time for lunch. All right, let’s eat.”



I used Adamantite Fortress to create a camp at the foot of the volcano, centered around a barbeque pit. The foundation was lifted a bit off the ground so we didn’t have to worry about the lava flowing close by, plus I added a simple outdoor roof to block the fire and ashes falling from the sky. Melfina then enveloped the structure in Celsius Briar to block the heat and shock waves from outside and cast Cool Zone as the finishing touch on the ultimate resting area. The flames spurting from the volcanoes in the distance even looked a bit like fireworks, giving a summery vibe. *Heh heh heh, this is better than your run-of-the-mill banquet hall! What’s more...*

“Ohhhh, so *that’s* why you were late, Kel-nii! You were making this!”

“Honey, is this the lava rock grilling that I’ve heard so much about?!”

Melfina’s eyes were practically sparkling as she stared long and hard at a large rectangular lava rock plate. Efil and I hadn’t come in last only because we were busy flirting. No, some of the time had been spent with Efil looking for the perfect rock using Discernment and me processing it.

“I am lighting it now,” Efil announced, bringing the flames on her hand to the area underneath the plate as everyone watched excitedly.

I believe no further explanation is necessary. That’s right, we were having a barbecue! On top of all the seafood caught by Sera and vegetables procured by Dahak, which had been inside Clotho’s Storage, we had secured a staggering amount of meat along the way. We had everything we could want in the way of ingredients. *Everything about this barbeque is perfect, so please help give it the best finish ever by showing up before we’re done eating, Flame Dragon King!*

“Think of this as a lead-in to the fight with the Flame Dragon King! Let’s dig in, everyone!” I cried, prompting a chorus of cheers from my companions.

If nothing else, at least Efil’s getting a warm-up out of this. Sort of.



A giant shadow abruptly fell over the volcanic area. Someone slow on the

uptake might have thought it was just the smoke from the volcanoes growing thicker, but no wild creature living here would have made such a foolish mistake. After all, to stand in this shadow was to court death. Even the strongest and most territorial monsters now hid themselves, suppressed their presences, held their breath, and simply waited for the threat from the sky to pass by.

“ROOOOAAARRR!”

A single roar made the air quiver and shook the earth as the clouds parted with his passage, allowing glorious rays of sunlight to fall through. The being soared through the air with self-assurance, both as a true king of the skies and a symbol of fear. The crimson scales that covered him from head to tail served as the ultimate shield against both physical and magical attacks, not bearing even the smallest scratch. His razor-sharp fangs and claws could sever steel like butter, and his giant tail could crush everything in its way. The hellish flames produced within his body, if released, could reduce an entire country to ash in one breath. Every part of him was a weapon, and he was the avatar of fire that threatened all living creatures in this world.

The great Flame Dragon King was back, returning home in triumph after a satisfying hunt.

“Hm?”

Something caught his attention. There was a smell in the air that seemed entirely out of place in this land ruled by all-consuming fire. It was not the usual acrid burnt smell of the scorching heat that easily killed even monsters well adapted for this environment. No, it was the fragrance of meat being cooked by an intelligent visitor, a perfume that could draw the attention of thousands upon thousands. The dragon’s mouth started secreting saliva before he knew it.

“This smell is coming from...there.”

With eyes fierce enough to kill with a look, he picked up on a strange new structure at the foot of the mountain that served as his nest. He was too far away to determine what this black box covered in briars made of ice, which cut a stark figure in this land, was for. However, faint wisps of smoke were escaping from small gaps here and there, confirming that it was indeed the source of the

fragrant smell in the air.

Having come to this conclusion, the Flame Dragon King threw away the freshly caught prey caught in his powerful legs and descended towards his new target.



“It’s not too thick, is it? Is the fire properly reaching all the way inside?” Melfina asked for the umpteenth time, even though she understood in her head that things were fine. As usual, there wasn’t a single shred of her dignity as a goddess to be found—she was nothing more than a girl with very cute pink lips drooling a waterfall of saliva at the moment.

“Please do not worry. I am in top form today,” Efil replied confidently as she continued tending to the lava rock plate loaded with a staggering variety of ingredients, one of which was a thick cut of dragon tail meat being grilled as a steak for Melfina. Thanks to the plate, heat permeated everything with perfect evenness, making it possible to thoroughly cook thick cuts of meat without burning them. Of course, Efil was skillful enough to pull this off even without the lava rock plate, but because I had worked hard making it, let’s say the plate also helped some.



Even so, it's incredible the way she's cooking for all of us at the same time while making sure each of our dishes is seasoned properly and done just the way we like them. This looks like a scene lifted straight out of a cooking manga. I just might fall for her all over again.

"Sister Efil, the pancakes seem done."

"Five more seconds, okay?"

"Understood."

Still, what's with these pancakes in the corner of the lava rock plate? Mdo, do you understand what a barbeque— No, it's fine. All that matters is that she's enjoying this. The same could be said for Dahak, but it's really weird how these dragons are so healthy even though they have such unbalanced diets. I guess dragons' bodies are just built differently!

Suddenly, Sera and Ange looked up from their stir-fried noodles at the same time, both with bits of noodle on their cheeks.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Something's coming our way from that direction," Sera replied.

"I mean, 'something' can only be one thing, right?"

The map on the Network was showing a large red circle approaching. It was still too far away for me to see with my bare eyes, but it was heading directly for us. This particular volcano was the nest of a tyrant, and no other monster would dare come close. Not to mention, my party had pretty much wiped out all the monsters in the area. Keeping all this in mind, only one possible answer remained.

"Efil."

The moment I called my maid's name, the fire underneath the lava rock plate burst up, throwing the plate and all the food she was cooking into the air. In the same second, Perfect Maid used the cooking utensils in her hands to apply the finishing touches to all the food and sent it flying to each person's plate faster than the eye could see. The way everything landed with the same precision she showed in her archery was nothing short of an art performance. Mdo's

pancakes were even stacked with three layers and topped with both honey and butter. I had only ever seen such a beautiful arrangement on the packaging for pancake mix. The dragon steak on Mel's plate was done to perfection...and a third of it was already gone.

"Master, I am off."

"Sure thing. Let him have it."

With her beloved bow and usual smile, Efil leaped up to the roof of the rest area.

"Are you sure about letting her go alone, Kel-nii?" Rion asked as she stuffed her face with the same pancakes Mdo was eating, having already moved on to dessert.

"She'll be fine. Honestly, I would love to do it with my own hands. But this is something that Efil needs to settle herself."

The newer members who did not know Efil's past, such as Dahak and Shutola, looked at me quizzically, but Efil's story was not for me to share and neither was it a story that would make anyone happy to hear.

"Make sure you all take a good look. It's not often that you get to see Efil being a hundred percent serious," I said as I turned my own eyes skyward, gnawing on a spare rib all the while.



"It smells delicious. Absolutely ravishing. For the scent alone to entrance me so, the offering must be that much more succulent. I will eat it. I will devour it. I simply must. I will have both the succulent offering and the succulent prey preparing it!"

The Flame Dragon King's eyes were nailed to the black structure with the blue briars as he rushed towards it single-mindedly. The fragrance he was smelling had reduced this proud king of the dragons to nothing more than a ravenous beast.

"Do you prefer rare, medium rare, or well-done?"

"Thoroughly charred, of course! Full firepower is always the answ—?!"

The Flame Dragon King instinctively replied after being asked a question, but then a deafening explosion went off, and a terrible blow struck his head. His body plunged to the ground as if he had been hit by a massive meteorite.

“Understood. It is quite rare to see someone who prefers meat very well done, but I promise to prepare this meal with all my heart.”

“You wretch!”

Right before crashing into a stream of boiling lava, the Flame Dragon King managed to arrest his fall, promptly turning around to spit a huge ball of flame in the direction the voice had come from. An explosion rang out once again from the other side, followed by an even louder roar halfway between the two combatants that overwhelmed even the sound of the erupting volcanoes in the background.

“Thoroughly charring an ingredient, however, is absolutely unforgivable. Only an amateur chef would disrespect the food so. Flame Dragon King, I will cook you into the ultimate dish to be presented to my master.”

“Did you just call *me*...a dish?”

The dragon looked up to see a beautiful maid perched on top of a dragon enveloped in flames, aiming a drawn bow in his direction.

She intends to challenge me, a dragon king, with such a puny weapon?

It had been so long since he had been challenged to a fight that the Flame Dragon King was at somewhat of a loss. He had thought that those foolish enough to do so had disappeared long ago.

And yet, the Head Maid from the House Celsius residence declared, loud and clear, “The cooking will now begin.”



Which volcano was it that had just erupted? The ground shook violently and fire shot into the sky before falling back down in a natural calamity. The destruction it wrought left no doubt that it had been quite the eruption. However, no one present was bothered by it; in fact, no one even batted an eye. And the reason was clear: a scene that surpassed a mere volcanic eruption

was unfolding before their eyes.

KA-BOOOOOOOOOOM!

Dozens of explosions were going off in quick succession, every last one more powerful than an eruption. Each time the Flame Dragon King spat his crimson breath, Efil shot it down with a crimson arrow, her unerring accuracy triggering the blasts in midair. Because the projectiles coming from both sides were packed with fire concentrated to the extreme, each of their collisions easily surpassed a volcanic eruption in intensity.

It was fortunate that this battle was being fought in the sky. If it had been on the ground, all the volcanoes in the area would have been replaced with craters as if the land had been bombarded by a shower of meteorites.

“The impudence!”

Eventually, the Flame Dragon King ran out of patience with this unending exchange and growled in frustration. Flame was met with flame, and neither side seemed about to tire anytime soon. However, although it might have sounded like the two sides were equal on paper, that was true only of their firepower. There was a crucial difference between Efil and the dragon.

“There!”

“Ugh!”

The difference was body size. Efil was only 154 centimeters tall, with a form slightly smaller than those around her age. Trying to hit her was akin to threading a needle eye that was zipping about at top speed. Conversely, the Flame Dragon King was massive even for dragons, being a match even for Boga. He made a target that was much easier to hit, and Efil’s attacks were starting to land on him.

However, as I thought, I’m not really hurting him at all.

Efil’s arrows all exploded upon making contact with the Flame Dragon King, turning into searing flames that blossomed across his scales. Yet, all it did was leave faint scorch marks, failing to deal any significant damage to the flesh beneath. Efil had the Blessing of the Flame Dragon King bolstering the destructive power of her fire elemental attacks, but her current opponent was

the source of that blessing. Rather than saying that he had resistance to fire, it was more apt to say that he was nullifying everything she was throwing at him.

“Everything you do is useless!”

The dragon king spread his wings and darted through the explosions to swiftly close in on Efil as he filled the air with a roar unique to dragons, which normally made all who heard it shrink up in instinctive terror.

Efil, who already had experience in taming three ancient dragons, did not falter. She calmly unleashed a Blaze Arrow directly into the giant open maw rushing at her.

“Mmmph!”

An explosion burst inside the dragon’s mouth with such force that it almost seemed enough to unhinge his jaw. Even so, he maintained his momentum, forcefully pushing on as if to swallow Efil, flames and all.

“I’ll first devour that dragon of yours!”

Efil kicked off from her mount and easily got out of the way, but the same couldn’t be said of her Pyrohydra. Fangs that could cut through all matter with form tore the creature down the length of its body.

In the split second when the Flame Dragon King was left defenseless after dealing such a huge attack, Efil murmured, “Milliard Burning Birds.”

Immediately, the flickering flames remaining from what had been the Pyrohydra transformed into birds of fire and rushed at the dragon king in a swarm of hundreds, aiming to both hurt and blind him. In that moment, he lost sight of Efil.

“Petty tricks one after another!”

“How’s this?”

The maid was now positioned directly underneath the dragon king. Right after dodging his charge, she shot an arrow upwards from an upside-down position that scored a clean hit on his lower jaw. Although the explosion itself did little to hurt him, the impact was enough to make his head snap up.

So, Blaze Arrow doesn’t work even in his mouth where his scales are thinnest.

While Blaze Arrow was normally powerful enough to be considered an artillery bombardment, it was not doing much against this opponent. The Flame Dragon King swung his powerful tail to wipe out all the birds in one go, then calmly brought his head back down.

“Hmph! You clearly cannot comprehend the fact that your puny attacks do nothing to me. Your flames are indeed impressive, but all your struggling is in vain!”

“So it would seem. I experience that power of yours daily, but never have I felt as threatened by it as I do today.”

“Daily? What are you saying?”

“My apologies; I was talking to myself. Please forget it. Before we proceed, I wish to make a rejoinder of sorts.” Efil looked up at the Flame Dragon King with a calm to match his own, standing on a newly made Pyrohydra. “Tenderizing meat before grilling it is Cooking 101. The right amount of pounding on your scales serves to break fibers in the flesh underneath, making even your cheap meat delicious. That said, too much pounding would overly stimulate the glutamate acid and lower the savoriness, so I think it is time to move on to the next step.”

The crimson flames that enveloped Penumbra and made up Pyrohydra turned blue as the latter sprouted seven more heads.

“Releasing Melting Pyrohydra from Primary to Octonary. I am now turning up the heat.”

“Interesti— Ngh?!” The Flame Dragon King was cut off by a sudden pain in his right eye.

“It appears that you have a tendency to concentrate too much on what is unfolding before you. As a result, you fail to notice minor changes.”

The bow in Efil’s hand was not Penumbra but Merciless, and the tactic she had just used was similar to what she had done with Milliard Burning Birds before. She had drawn the Flame Dragon King’s attention with the show of Pyrohydra transforming into Melting Pyrohydra while unleashing an arrow with Merciless enchanted with Covert Action up until the moment it landed. The

dragon had completely fallen for this trick and now had three arrows sprouting from his right eye to pay for the mistake.

“Ha...ha ha...HA HA HA HA! I see. So I was the one who failed to take this fight seriously. How long has it been since someone has managed to hurt me? How long has it been since I last felt so alive?! Very well. Girl, I acknowledge you as a proper opponent and not mere prey!”

The nearby volcanoes, which had been erupting irregularly this whole time, fell silent all at once. The oppressive stillness felt like the calm before a storm.

“Be honored. Very few have witnessed me in this form.”

Abruptly, the volcanoes all erupted in one deafening chorus. They spewed streams of incandescent lava that gathered around the Flame Dragon King, transforming his appearance by turning his claws, wings, tail, and fangs searing hot. At the same time, the exceptionally thick stream coming from the massive volcano that served as his nest coalesced behind his back into a sun-like nimbus that bore great resemblance to what Murmur, the previous Light Dragon King that Kelvin had encountered in Deramis, had used. To top things off, the dragon’s wounded right eye now burned with a furious white-hot flame.

“This is my true—”

“My apologies. This is taking too long.”

Efil hated wasting unnecessary time when preparing a meal. Without warning, one of the Melting Pyrohydras blew off the Flame Dragon King’s right arm.



I...lost in firepower?

It was only after a beat that the Flame Dragon King felt the pain in his right shoulder. The Pyrohydra, which had already gotten far away, swallowed the arm it had bitten off and thoroughly roasted it using its blue flames.

Unfortunately for the Flame Dragon King, he did not have time to get his thoughts in order. The other six Melting Pyrohydras aside from the one Efil was riding were already rushing at him to gouge out other parts of his body.

BOOOOM!

The Flame Dragon King's wings absorbed the lava drawn from his nest and blasted its energy out in high-powered jets that enabled him to move away much faster than the Melting Pyrohydras could follow.

"That's..."

What the Flame Dragon King was doing brought a certain something to mind for Kelvin and Rion, the two who had knowledge of the modern world. Indeed, the multiple streams of flames being expelled from the dragon's wings was the spitting image of fighter jets with engine afterburners. What's more, he could direct the jets in any direction he wanted in order to make his path much harder to guess.

"Ha ha ha! It is my first time taking damage from the very element that I command! However—"

"This does not change the fact that you make a large target."

Once again, Efil's attack interrupted the dragon's words. Another Melting Blaze Arrow easily found its way to him despite his erratic movements.

"HMPH!"

The Flame Dragon King's claw shot out to slap away the blue-flamed arrow. Pain coursed through his hand. Even though he had been in contact with the arrow for only a fraction of a second, it had been enough to melt off his lava claws and even burn his skin. His resistance to fire almost seemed to make no difference whatsoever.

"What a wonderful display of firepower! Allow me to repay you!"

The Flame Dragon King would not get off unscathed if Efil's flames touched him, but the reverse was also true; Efil's body would likely explode if any of the dragon's furious attacks were to even graze her. This was a showdown between two specialized damage dealers where victory hinged on who managed to land their attacks.

The Melting Pyrohydras were still doggedly pursuing the Flame Dragon King to tear him apart, but the dragon suddenly turned around and bathed them in a Breath Attack. Unlike the balls of fire that he had been spitting so far, this was a sustained attack over a spread-out area that turned the sky into a sea of flames

as if his intention was to burn fire with fire. After doing one pass, the dragon turned around and aimed his attack at Efil too. Seemingly having no need to catch his breath, he finally succeeded in getting his all-devouring flames onto the neck of the Pyrohydra that Efil was riding.

Efil promptly leaped off her Melting Pyrohydra, but no matter how high her Agility was, there was no denying that being completely surrounded by the dragon's flames was a precarious situation. What's more, he could fly with complete freedom thanks to the afterburners on his wings. The difference in their mobility was plain to see.

"This is the end. Succumb to my flames!"

The fiercest flames of the day surged towards Efil like a wall of death.

BOOOOOM!

"What?!"

"I see. So, fire can be used in this way as well. Thank you for the lesson."

Efil had made her own arrows explode in close proximity as a way to propel herself in midair. She was effectively copying what she had just seen the Flame Dragon King do. Anyone without the Blessing of the Flame Dragon King would have suffered much more than mere burns, but from a different perspective, the fact that she *did* have that Blessing meant she could probably do anything he could. By shooting her arrows in quick succession, Efil managed to gain some control over the direction of her flight.

"Woman, you sure are making this fun!"

The midair battle resumed. Blinding explosions lit up the sky again and again, with the occasional form of a dragon made of blue flames bursting out and the Flame Dragon King's roars filling the air.

"It's so bright..." Shutola groaned.

"Shutola, if it makes you uncomfortable, you don't have to look at it," Gerard said gently.

Indeed, as Kelvin's group watched the fight, their eyes were getting a bit tired from all the bright flashes.

“This is basically seeing a bomber having a dogfight with a jet fighter,” Kelvin joked. “Except, one of them is way too oversized.”

Rion laughed. “Efil-nee gets pretty crazy ideas in the middle of battle sometimes. I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t have been able to pull that off even if it occurred to me.”

“Mm, don’t do it; you’ll end up maimed or worse. By the way, Mel, what’re you eating there?”

“Oh, fis? I’ fas on fe found fere.” (Oh, this? It was on the ground there.)

Rion did a double take. “Wait, isn’t that the Flame Dragon King’s arm...”

“Mel, you really shouldn’t be eating food you picked up off the ground! Not even humans do that, much less a goddess!” Kelvin scolded her.

“Bu’ it’f fefifous...” (But it’s delicious...)

Suddenly, Danger Detection started blaring for everyone who possessed it.

“Uh-oh, Kel-nii, that’s not good, is it?” Rion asked, looking up.

“It might even reach us,” Kelvin replied. “Mel, eat quickly.”

Melfina, who had already finished off the food, gave him a look. “Honey, this is no time to be making jokes.”

“Huh? Oh, uh, sorry...” Although Kelvin felt a bit indignant at Melfina’s chiding tone, he let it go and focused his attention on the reddish-black sphere floating above the Flame Dragon King’s left hand. It burned with a quiet intensity, emanating an exceptionally ominous aura.

The dragon chuckled. “I never expected to use this today.”

Efil warily deployed multiple Melting Pyrohydras, making them circle around herself protectively as she quietly said, “Melting Cage Rampart.”

Blue flames roared to life in a split second—not as a single wall, but as six walls that trapped the Flame Dragon King within as if they were a cage. This Rank S spell produced such extreme heat that any living creature inside would quickly lose all fluid in their body and dry up before catching fire and dying. Even if someone was able to survive for a few seconds, there was no way for

them to escape from this enclosure created with the ultimate flames. The only thing they could do was accept their fate and be cooked alive.

However, the dragon king merely scoffed. “It’s useless. This orb here contains all my power. You may make your walls and run around, but I promise you there is no getting away from this attack of mine.”

The ball of energy started to spin, going faster and faster as it picked up momentum.

“Come, despair. Come, destruction. Woman, you may die proud, knowing that you succeeded in making me get serious.” The Flame Dragon King clenched his fist, energy ball and all. “Ember Cremation.”

The world was filled with crimson light. Melting Cage Rampart was blasted apart, the Melting Pyrohydras were erased, and a whole part of the volcanic area was reduced to ash. Nothing within view was spared. Despite being so far away and despite the multiple barriers that Kelvin and Melfina had put up using Green Magic and Blue Magic, their barbeque building still collapsed.

“Ga hah hah! I said it, did I not? Escaping from Ember Cremation is impo—”

“You were right. It was quite hot.”

“Wha— UGH!”

The Flame Dragon King’s head snapped up in surprise as a blue flaming arrow fell down, slicing off his left arm. Efil was perched high up in the sky, entirely unharmed but for the burn marks on her clothes and headband.

“You... How did you—” The Flame Dragon King hurriedly rekindled the parts of his body transformed by lava, but it was clear that he was almost tapped out, seeing as the lava was starting to turn dark.

“Whatever you can survive, so can I. It only makes sense.”

“Again with your incomprehensible comments!”

“Then allow me to spell it out for you: a chef does not fear fire.” Efil nocked a new arrow.

“You’ve got another thing coming if you think this is all I can do!”

The wing afterburners roared back on, enabling the dragon to do a quick somersault in an attempt to slap Efil down with his powerful tail. He even gathered the last dregs of power in his body to set his thorny tail on fire, effectively turning it into a giant flaming sword.

“Tail Sword of the Flame Emperor!”

Judging by the exchange of attacks so far, the two sides were basically evenly matched in firepower. Now that exhaustion was running high and MP low, only willpower and luck was left.

Or maybe not.

“Mother, please lend me your strength. Just a little.”

The jade-colored clip in Efil’s hair, which was a memento from her mother, Rumil, glowed softly. The next instant, Efil loosed an arrow that left a vivid blue-and-green trail in its wake as it skewered the Flame Dragon King, tail and all, bringing him crashing to the ground.



A cloud of dust hung over the rubble that was all that remained of our barbeque setup. The Flame Dragon King’s attack had gotten through both the barriers that Melfina and I had erected and destroyed a building I had created using Adamantite Fortress, fully impressing upon us just how destructive it had been. My heart twinged with pain as I looked at the remains of the structure.

“Dammit. You’re not supposed to go home after a barbeque before cleaning up after yourself, but now we have so much more to pick up!”

Naturally, my heart was hurting because of all the scattered rubble and trash that we now had to go through. What was supposed to have been a simple process that only involved washing the lava rock plate, separating our trash, and dismantling the barbeque space had turned into a massive cleanup project due to the Flame Dragon King’s indiscriminate attack. *I bet if he ever went camping, he’s the kind of person who’d just leave his trash all around!*

“My king, do you not remember when you accidentally chopped down half the Forest of Crests?”

“The Elders gave me permission at the time, I wholeheartedly prostrated myself in apology, *and* I had Dahak go back and replant everything afterwards!”

What a nostalgic memory that is. That was when I learned how to properly control my first Rank S spell. Then Melfina put me through a boot camp that made what Sera did to the Heroes seem like child’s play.

“Kelvin, we’re done with all the cleaning up,” Sera announced with a large trash bag slung over her shoulder. Since most of the trash was organic, we were bringing it back for Dahak to use as fertilizer.

“Gotcha. That only leaves this mountain of rubble. Well...Clotho, go ahead and eat it.”

My buddy emerged from the sleeve of my robe and swelled up large enough to swallow all the rubble whole. I called it rubble, but it had all been made from my magic, and my slime was capable of—and loved—absorbing all magic. And hey, this magic would remain in its Storage for a rainy day, so two birds with one stone and all that.

“All nice and clean now.” Sera nodded with satisfaction.

The rule with going camping was to leave the place cleaner than it had been when you got there.

Now then, since we’re all done here, let’s go meet the Flame Dragon King.



“Master.”

“Hey there, Efil. Well done!”

Efil greeted us as we made our way down into an exceptionally large crater. Her shoulders were bare due to the battle having burned off parts of her clothing. Although she seemed unbothered, maintaining her mannerisms as a maid perfectly, I noticed a slight blush on her cheeks and at the tips of her ears. *How does she always look so perfect?*

“Who... Who are all of you?”

“Sup, Flame Dragon King. Not looking so hot now, eh? But I’m glad you’re still drawing breath.”

The dragon king glared daggers up at me from where he was lying on the ground, struggling for breath. He was nailed in place by a giant shaft surrounded by blue flames that was large enough to have been launched from a ballista. It had skewered his tail and body. His shoulders were cauterized where his arms had been burned off and were therefore not bleeding, but the lava all over his body had hardened and gone completely black. It was clear that he had expended all his energy.

“What are you saying?”

“Y’see, we have a few questions.”

As the Flame Dragon King was an irreplaceable source of information about what had happened in Efil’s past, I had told Efil to do her best to take him alive. If her aim was to kill him, she would have aimed straight for his head from the start, not his arms.

I squatted down in front of the dragon. “Do you recognize this girl?” I asked, pointing at Efil.

Silence filled the air for a brief moment, then he gasped. “You! I thought you looked familiar. So, you are the elf from— No, that makes no sense. I killed you myself. But that clip in your hair...”

“The woman you are speaking about is my mother,” Efil said in a level tone.

“What are you— Ah, by then, she had already...”

“Hey, sorry to interrupt when you’re going down memory lane and all that. Basically, we’re after you for revenge. Like a fool, you attacked the Village of Elves and murdered Efil’s mother, Rumil. We’re here to make sure you pay for everything you did.”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about! It was her kind who started everything! An elven man beguiled me for my blood and ran away with it! Then the woman I brought back from the village ran away with a human man! If you want to blame someone for what happened, blame the elves! Sages of the forest? Hah! More like swindlers of the forest! I’m sure they were in cahoots with the human, having planned to smuggle the woman back out from the start!”

The dragon was practically frothing at the mouth.

“I searched and found the elven man who had absconded with my blood. And strangely, the human male brought the elven woman back. Why? I couldn’t say. He was likely fearful of my retribution. So I tore both of them to pieces! That’s why I killed them! Both the blood and woman had been mine from the start! Then I sent the woman’s corpse to the village to remind them of fear! Everything that happened was merely retribution for their own actions!”

Before Sera could even get him with Blood Dominion, the Flame Dragon King had started singing like a lark. He was so enraged that he sounded somewhat hysterical, but his account was coherent enough for us to get the gist of what had happened. Nellas had also mentioned that the Flame Dragon King was searching for someone. As it turned out, everything had been the consequence of this elven man tricking the Flame Dragon King out of his blood. So the dragon had then killed the man and kidnapped Rumil, but someone else had rescued her.

Was that man Efil’s father? But I don’t understand him sending Rumil back. Judging from the dragon king’s reaction, Efil’s existence is a surprise to him. I doubt we can find out any more about her past here.

“Details aside, you still set the Village of Elves on fire and killed Efil’s mom. Those facts still stand.”

“Do you realize who I am?! How dare you—”

“Well, you won’t be sitting on that high and mighty seat of yours any longer, so why should I bother paying you respect?” Having heard everything I wanted to know, I stood up and got ready for a Summoning. “Everything ready on your end, Efil?”

“Yes, Master. This Flame Dragon King is now very well done and ready for live tasting.”

The arrow skewering the beast was still red hot, cooking his meat from the inside out in a way that brought to mind roasted chicken. A mouthwatering fragrance of bubbling meat juices filled the air.

“Mmmm, that smells heavenly. He *is* ready, then.”

“Live tas—?! Don’t tell me—”

Ignoring the alarm in the Flame Dragon King’s voice, I turned to call out the rock dragon who was the star of the night, Boga.

“This is the only dragon in our family who’s omnivorous,” I explained. “I mean, where else would you find a vegetarian dragon, right? And, get this, we even have one with a sweet tooth.”

“Brother, me being vegetarian aside, I have a dream. Earth Dragon King is the only title I want!”

“I am busy consuming these pancakes I protected with my life. Boga can have this one.”

“Rawr...”

An incredible amount of saliva was spilling from Boga’s mouth. I had purposely left him out of the barbeque for this. He was nice and hungry now.

Suddenly, Mel rushed over. “Let me go!” she howled. “It’s mine! That’s mine!”

Gerard managed to catch her in the nick of time. “Princess, please stop struggling!”

“You already ate both his arms, Mel!” Sera added, lending Gerard a hand.

Ah, the two of them won’t be able to hold out much longer. Let’s wrap things up. I leaned just a little bit closer to the Flame Dragon King’s head. “The point is for you to die while feeling the pain of being eaten alive. I hope you put on a nice show for us.”

Efil smiled. “Boga-chan, go for it.”

“RAAAWWRRRRRR!”

“No, stop— AGGGGGHHHHHHHH!”

Boga leaped towards the feast before his eyes. His large jaw clamped down, tearing off a sizable chunk that he chewed enthusiastically as he fully enjoyed the taste. This repeated again and again as screams of agony reverberated between the volcanoes and traveled far and wide.

“Are you satisfied now, Master?”

“That’s what I should be asking you.”

“You were angry on my behalf, weren’t you?”

“Well...who knows.”

My hand naturally found Efil’s. It was warm.



Far, far away to the southeast, around the time Kelvin’s group killed the Flame Dragon King, a whole throng of people were crowding the walls of Castle Faanis. This included guards, servants, and civil officials—practically everyone from the palace was there, and they were all transfixed by the sight in the distance while furiously gossiping among themselves.

“I came because I heard a giant explosion from the other side of the mountain, and now we have this. What... What is that sound? A dragon’s scream?”

“Oh, it stopped. For some reason, that gave me the chills.”

“You say that, but you looked excited just now. You had this huge grin on your face.”

“That area’s always been covered in black smoke but was just now illuminated by some crazy bright light. The volcanoes don’t usually make sounds loud enough to reach all the way here. Did you hear it?”

“It was loud enough to wake the dead. I was sleeping like a log after a night shift and even I woke up right away.”

“So, what was it? The Esteemed Heroes already killed the fire dragon that was attacking our city, right?”

The women sounded more brash than afraid as the men carefully chose their reactions. Fierce discussion broke out here and there, with some suggesting they form an investigative expedition as others insisted on taking a wait-and-see approach.

Suddenly, the King of Faanis casually showed up, having been drawn by the

commotion. “What is this gathering for?” he asked in a dignified voice. The prime minister was right behind him.

“Your Majesty?! Um, the truth is...” A messenger familiar with the king described everything that had just happened. The red and blue flashes. The explosions that had been even more deafening than the usual eruptions. The scream that had *probably* come from a dragon. All of these seemed like omens, and the soldier’s apprehension was clear on his face.

“To think such mysterious phenomena were occurring so close by... Did you catch any of this, Prime Minister?”

“Unfortunately, I was fully occupied. How about you, Your Majesty?”

“Same here. And I was underground, to boot.”

This was the first time these two were hearing about what had happened. Perhaps they had been tackling duties important enough to require significant focus. The soldiers were understanding enough to let the matter go, but that was partly because there was something else they were even more curious about.

“Um, by the way, may I ask why both of you are wearing such...suspicious-looking robes?”

Instead of their usual formal attire, the king and prime minister were wearing black robes that brought to mind typical evil mages from stories. Fashion-wise, it did not go well with the king’s crown, to put it mildly. What’s more, the robes looked quite well worn.

“Oh, these? This is, well...” At a loss for words, the king looked at his prime minister.

“Huh? Oh, uh...right! This is a highly confidential secret, one that we cannot reveal in public. Is that not so, Your Majesty?”

“I-Indeed! That is absolutely correct. All of you are to forget seeing me and the prime minister here today.”

“Interesting. Is it a secret even from me?”

“Of course. How many times must I repeat that it is confiden—”

The king's words died in his mouth as he turned around and saw the woman smiling brightly at him. She had healthy tanned skin and amber hair that fluttered in the wind, looking like a much taller and more mature copy of Ran and Ren, the twin princesses. Of course she did. After all, this was their mother, Bakke Faanis, the country's queen and shadow ruler.

"Bakke?!" Both the king and prime minister exclaimed, practically jumping out of their skins.

Belying her smile, Queen Bakke looked so threatening that despair filled the two men's faces. They realized their near future had just turned as dark as their robes.

"Do I need to ask again? Is your secret a secret even from me?"

"Hold on, Bakke! Weren't you out on an expedition?!"

"Heh heh, we called her back!"

"We can basically read each other's minds!"

Ren and Ran peeked out from either side behind Bakke's large form.

"You two!"

The girls were giggling with their hands over their mouths as if celebrating a good prank, but the king and prime minister were very sure that things were not going to end there.

"I heard the esteemed Heroes of Deramis visited right after I set off to chase the fire dragon. Talk about bad timing. If I had delayed my departure by a few days, I'd have gotten the chance to meet them. One of them's a cute boy, right?"

"You really lucked out, mother."

"Touya-sama is ours, mother."

"Don't worry, my daughters. I'm behind you one hundred percent. Worst case, you can make him yours by setting up a fait accompli. I'll help you."

"Thank you, mother!"

"You're the best, mother!"

“Uh, Bakke, honey, it doesn’t sound like a joke when you’re the one saying it.”

“What’d you say?”

“Sorry, nothing.”

The king was now all hunched down, the dignity from when he had first shown up gone without a trace. Behind him, the prime minister had already adopted the seiza pose.

“So, um, Bakke, why *are* you back? According to your itinerary, you weren’t coming back for a while longer.”

“Hm? Well, you can say that I had a premonition. We’ll be having problems with a fire dragon again.”

“But that can’t be! The fire dragon you were chasing was already killed by the Heroes!”

“I can just tell. You may think it’s superstition, but the blood of fire dragons runs through the veins of us Faanistan women. That’s how sensitive we are to those lizards’ movements. You still remember how restless we all were right before that fire dragon attacked, right?”

“I mean, yes, but...”

The night before the assault, the women in the capital had seemed extremely high-strung, almost like wild animals sensing a coming calamity. Bakke herself had kept clenching and unclenching her hands while she glared daggers at everyone. The memory frightened the king so much that he immediately thrust it back into the depths of his mind.

“Now, that’s enough of you diverting the subject. I’ll give you one more chance. Do you want to die or will you talk?”

Both men said, “We’ll talk” at the same time, followed by the king revealing every last detail about why he was wearing this robe and why he had been underground. He knew better than to hold anything back.

“Huh? A curse ritual?”

“I-It wasn’t something as serious as a curse. It was only, uh, enough to cause an upset stomach. Yes, it was basically just a prank.”

“His Majesty was only trying to take revenge for what happened to Our Highnesses. He was so focused that he couldn’t hear what happened outside.”

Bakke sighed so long and so deep, it was as if she were a fire dragon unleashing a Breath Attack. She already knew the king and prime minister had been importing Toraj-made cursed goods such as voodoo dolls by trading for them. However, she had not expected them to be this deep in it.

“So, what’re you taking revenge for?”

“Um, for our daughters...”

“Omigosh, father! We’ve already explained a billion times that the girls we met did nothing bad to us! They even tended to us and brought us back! Why don’t you listen?!”

“But—”

“Spare us your butts! We may be impulsive and reckless, but we always make sure to pay our debts. That’s what it means to be Faanistan women! Right, mother?”

“That’s right! Well said! In the first place, honey, if you really want to take revenge, send a proper expedition force! All you’re getting better at is making tea. Did you do any martial training while I was gone?”

“We’re talking about Grim Reaper here, though! What would you do if we angered him?! He’d erase Faanis from the map!”

“His Majesty speaks—”

“You’re the *last* person who should say that!” Bakke’s right fist sent the king flying into the air. The prime minister, who had been about to get to his feet to indicate his support for what the king was saying, immediately returned to the seiza pose. His eyes indicated that he had obtained enlightenment of sorts.

“I’m Leopardess!” Bakke roared. “Have you two forgotten my alias? Or do you think I don’t deserve it?!”

“No, Your Majesty. We were entirely in the wrong,” the prime minister said, betraying his liege without batting an eye.

The king glared at him. “Prime Minister, how dare—”

Bakke cut him off. “I’m feeling a lot of pent-up energy after all my time away. Looks like we could both do with some time together, hm? You’re not getting any sleep tonight, honey.”

“Wait, no, that sounds— Save me, Prime Mini—”

The prime minister pulled out a pair of earplugs and put them in. The screams that he definitely could not hear faded into the distance as the king disappeared from view.

“Omigosh, mother and father are so sappy!”

“So embarrassing, gosh.”

Regardless of the unusual phenomenon that had occurred, the sun still beat down on the Country of Fire as its men lived warily and its women passionately. This was, ultimately, an absolutely ordinary day.



Rumble.

“Huh?”

As my party was climbing down the crater of the giant volcano known as the Fiery Mouth of Purgatory in pursuit of the teleportation gate that would lead to Abyssland, the sound of a growling stomach that, while cute, always boded badly for the finances of my family could be heard.

I looked up. “Didn’t you eat just now, Mel? It’s a bit too soon, even for you.”

“That’s strange. For some reason, I was so hungry before, I nearly lost myself, and now this. Maybe I’m under the weather. Or maybe this heat is making me hungrier than usual.”

“Whoa there, you know it’s gonna get even hotter up ahead, right? Did someone cast a curse on you or something? Are you gonna be okay, goddess?”

Mel insisted that, as a girl, she could not go on with her stomach growling the whole time. After thinking deeply for a while, she suddenly beamed at me as if indicating that she had just had a brilliant idea.

“I know what I have to do. If this heat is what’s draining me, then I just have

to make it not hot anymore. That should settle my stomach!”

It sounded like a pretty dumb conclusion to arrive at, but Melfina promptly put it into practice, covering the entire path leading down into the crater with ice. Every once in a while, the volcano would erupt and a pillar of lava would surge upwards right next to us (since Cool Zone was not enough to protect us, we had to erect a barrier each time). However, thanks to Melfina going absolutely overboard and creating a world of ice that extended down as far as the eye could see, we no longer had to worry about these bursts of lava. So in a way, what she did worked out great for the rest of us.

Of course, there was also a part of me that worried about the environmental impact of her freezing the interior of the volcano. It was said that other monsters steered clear of this place where the Flame Dragon King nested, but for all I knew, perhaps there *were* still creatures living there. Very strong, powerful creatures that would have given us a great fight but were now weakened by the drastic changes to their habitat. I was almost beside myself with worry.

“Turns out the heat really was the reason. I think I feel better. Judging by my stomach, I’m now slightly under eighty percent full. Honey, I think I can go on!”

“Seriously?” *It really was the heat?!*

I cast a doubtful eye at the road, which had gone beyond “cool” to being rather chilly, and noticed a red form shivering in the bottom half of my field of vision. It was Mdo, who was currently red-haired and wearing the red outfit that Efil had made for her.

“Mdo, you okay? You look pretty cold.”

“Ugh, I don’t like the cold...”

The Light Dragon King now looked like a diminutive chihuahua. Of Mdo’s various personalities, we had brought along the one most resistant to heat because we had expected the volcano to be hot, but that consideration was now working against her. She was resistant to all elements except for darkness when in dragon form, but just like Dahak, although assuming human form made it easy for her to enter much smaller spaces, it also weakened her. In her case, she had to also consider elemental affinity when choosing which form to go

with.

“Sister Sera, I want to switch out with my blue self. Please put me to sleep.”

“Hypnosis would do, right? Just a light sleep?”

“Mm. Light sleep, please.”

“Well, we’ve come down quite a ways, so we might as well take a break here.” I asked Melfina to expand the area we were in and brought out a bed from Clotho’s Storage for Mdo to lie in.

“Here I go.” Sera gently laid a hand clad in Black Magic on Mdo’s head as if giving her a pat. Immediately, Mdo closed her eyes with a soft whimper. She currently had red hair, which made her and Sera look like sisters.

Speaking of which, I hope we can clear up Bell Baal’s relationship with Sera sometime soon. She’s hostile towards us for some reason right now, but I’ve got a feeling a lot of things would get resolved if she could have a serious sibling fight with Sera. Sometimes, you just have to bare all your emotions and throw them at someone. And who knows? Maybe I could get involved somehow when it goes down.

“Kel-nii, Mdo-chan’s hair has turned blue.”

Just as Rion said, Mdo’s fiery red hair had turned into a fresh, vivid blue. The fact that her outfit had also turned blue indicated that each of her personalities had its own equipment slots. It was somewhat inconvenient that she could not change personalities without first falling asleep or changing into a dragon, as it limited what she could do in battle. Of course, with the amount of MP I had, I could Unsummon and re-Summon her if needed, but the MP required was nothing to scoff at.

“Good morning, my liege. What am I to do with my wimpy red self?”

“Good morning, Mdo. I seem to remember you crying to her saying that the volcano’s dangerous, though.”

“This and that are different things. Sister Efil, can you make me the same pancakes you made for my red self later?”

“Aww, you liked them that much?”

“They are an art and you have perfected it. I cannot stand the fact that I can enjoy them only in my memories.”

Mdo liked both hot and cold desserts. After waking up from what was even lighter than a nap, she was, to my astonishment, already begging for food. All I could remember in the way of hot dessert was the piping hot sweet red bean soup I’d had in the morning for New Year’s in Japan. And even then, it was vague, as I didn’t have any personal memories.

“Hey, Kelvin. My nose tells me there’s treasure if we go down a bit more,” Ange suddenly said, peering down the spiral staircase.

You can even sense treasure now? I guess you really are the world’s best scout. “Can you see it, Efil?”

“There...is indeed a golden mountain on top of the frozen lava. I also see a gate that matches what Mel-sama described.”

“Why would there be treasure in a place like this? It’s fine now ’cus everything’s frozen, but wouldn’t it normally just melt?”

“There appears to be a barrier sealing off the space.”

Dahak spoke up. “Wouldn’t that area be the actual nest of the Flame Dragon King? There are dragons who like to stockpile riches as a way to show off.”

Ahh, I see. If I had to guess, the barrier’s probably there to protect the teleportation gate from the lava, but the Flame Dragon King took a liking to it and chose to nest there. If a demon ever came through from the other side, they’d probably get a nasty surprise. With bad timing, they’d find themselves having to fight a dragon king without even knowing what was going on. Little wonder there are so few demons on the surface.

“If it were me, I’d be a bit more classy and fill the place with vegetables.”

I...guess each dragon has a different sense of values. I shot Dahak a wry look and shrugged. “Well, we might as well take it since we’re here and all.”

Ange rubbed her hands together. “I’m glad you see it my way, Kelvin-kun. Let’s hurry!”

Our break was over, so we continued descending the spiral staircase. A while

later, a lake of lava frozen in large waves came into sight. In the middle of the lake was an island that was large enough for the Flame Dragon King to comfortably rest on. The same gate that I had seen in each country stood smack dab in the middle, surrounded by piles and piles of glittering gold within a space that was clearly man-made. There was so much treasure that I couldn't help but wonder how the dragon king had managed to sleep on top of it all.

When we got close enough, Melfina made a direct bridge to the "island" and we stepped inside the barrier. To our surprise, the temperature was quite comfortable. It had been quite chilly outside but was just perfect within. Not that any of us would have thought to live here like the Flame Dragon King had.

"Look at all the gold and silver!" Ange exclaimed.

Shutola threw up a hand. "I-It's so bright. Even the treasury of Trycen doesn't have this much treasure."

"Just how long did that old lizard spend gathering all of this?" I replied distractedly, my attention fully arrested by the teleportation gate. "We can always take inventory another time."

The gate had already been activated. No, from the look of things, it was perhaps permanently activated. On the other side was the land of my dreams, Abyssland. I had no idea what kind of place we would emerge into, but I was already thinking about what we would do first.

"According to what I sense from the pendants I gave the Heroes, Sylvia's group hasn't gotten there yet," I mumbled.

"They're going through the Waterfall of Heaven and Hell, right? You think they're okay?" Rion asked anxiously.

I don't think there's any need to worry about that group. She's strong enough to have killed me once, though she did kill herself in the process.

Despite knowing that she wouldn't hear it, I couldn't help but say, "Sorry, Sylvia, but we're going on ahead." *It's time to kick things off!*

"Dearest brother! Dearest brother! Don't forget to gather all this treasure before we go!"

“Ah.”

Sorry, Sylvia, scratch that. It's gonna take us a little while longer.



Pure blue stretched all the way to the horizon, with nary a ship in sight and the waves lapping the beach as gently as the small wisps of cloud drifting across the similarly blue sky. This was the Dragon Path of the Vermilion Shrines, a part of the Dragon Sea considered sacred by the people of Toraj for being the residence of their guardian dragon, the Water Dragon King. Access to this part of the shoreline was so strict that even the current ruler of Toraj, Queen Tsubaki Fujiwara, had been told by her predecessor that this was not somewhere even she could casually visit. The red shrines stood tall in the Dragon Sea, clearly marking this holy ground dedicated to the Water Dragon King. Needless to say, this was the location that held the most historical significance within Toraj.

Tsubaki spread her arms. “And here we are! This is the Dragon Path of the Vermilion Shrines, the place where our country’s beloved Dragon God resides!”

“Thank you for bringing us here, Tsubaki-sama,” Ema said respectfully. “I cannot help but be overwhelmed no matter how many times I see the Dragon Sea. It is a view that takes my breath away.”

Sylvia nodded. “Mm, been a year. It’s as pretty as it was last year.”

“Isn’t it just?!” Tsubaki gushed. “I’m glad you appreciate it!”

Of course, Tsubaki was not one to obediently follow what her predecessors—or anyone, for that matter—said. She was quite ready to give those she had taken a liking to permission to enter this sacred area, and that included Sylvia and Ema, who had just come to Toraj with their group. The queen’s penchant for wooing talent was as strong as ever.

“By the way, Sylvia and Ema, just as our Dragon God has acknowledged your abilities, so do I. What say you to using those abilities for Toraj’s sake?”

Tsubaki was at it again, firing off an attempt to solicit Sylvia and Ema as naturally as she breathed. No one knew just how many times she had posed the question to this pair and had been rebuffed. However, Tsubaki had the mental

fortitude to keep at it regardless. Similarly, even though Kelvin had turned her down countless times so far, she would include a letter with the regular shipments of rice she dispatched to his house, attempting different approaches each time. In a way, it could be said that she was invincible.

“I’m sorry, there are things we have to do right now,” Sylvia apologized.

“And I have to go with Sylvia,” Ema added. “I’m sorry, Tsubaki-sama.”

“I see, I see.” Tsubaki nodded. “In that case, I’ll ask again sometime in the future!”

“No, I mean, we can’t—”

“I *will* ask again!” Tsubaki closed her folding fan with a snap and pointed it at Ema, pressuring her into silence.

After escaping from Toraj, these two had received quite a lot of support from Tsubaki. Due to their debt of gratitude from that time, they could never emphatically refuse her.

“But when we’re done,” Sylvia said slowly, “we might consider it.”

Tsubaki’s eyes lit up. “Do you speak truthfully?! I would welcome you with open arms!”

“Huh? Are you sure about that, Sylvia?” Ema asked, taken by surprise.

“Mhm. The food in Toraj is delicious and there’s lots of nature here. I can’t forget the meal we had at the castle.”

“Hmm...well, if Sylvia’s fine with it, then I won’t object.”

“Those words bring me joy. The chefs at my castle are the best of the best, and you know how particular we Torajians are about food! Look forward to it. Not too long ago, they even received instruction from the biggest name in the world of chefs these days, ‘Bombing Princess’ Efil! The food they serve now is completely different from what you had a year ago.”

Sylvia whirled around. “Tell me more!”

Tsubaki had sensed this was the moment to double down, and sure enough, Sylvia, at least, had been hooked. After Sister Ellen was found, things were

going to get a lot livelier in Toraj.

At the same time, Ema was thinking, *If we settle down in Toraj, Nagua and mother are gonna stay with us, right? I honestly can't see the two of them clicking.* However, it was about time she stopped worrying about her troublesome colleague and performed her role as the person who moved things along.

She tuned back in as Tsubaki was saying, "I see. So your business here today includes meeting our Dragon God."

"Yes, it does," Ema replied. "His help is absolutely necessary for all of us to pass through the Waterfall of Heaven and Hell."

"We're here to say hi too," Sylvia added.

"That consideration is greatly appreciated. However, even I am not sure that our moody god would agree to meet you so soon as the previ—"

WHOOOOOSH!

The ocean suddenly opened up along the line of towering red gates as if to invite Sylvia's group in. The receding water revealed a path of beautifully paved stone on the seabed that asserted itself as if saying, "Come on in!" The torii gates that had previously only been visible above sea level could now be seen in their full splendor.

"Apparently, this can happen too," Tsubaki mused. "When Kelvin's group came, our god did not show even the slightest interest, though. I only barely managed to maintain my dignity by lying that even I was not always granted an audience whenever I wanted."

"Kelvin came here?" Sylvia asked absentmindedly as she stared blankly at the path.

"Indeed." Tsubaki nodded. "There is no way he would not take an interest in our Dragon God. Unfortunately, the path did not open for him. Our Dragon God was so unresponsive that I doubt anyone else knows about the visit."

Ema thought, *Ah, the Dragon God probably didn't want to deal with someone who'd challenge him to a fight right off the bat.*

“My apologies, I did not come to talk your ears off. You wish to meet our Dragon God, yes? It would be rude to keep him waiting too long. Let us go forward.”

“You’re coming with us, Tsubaki-sama?”

“Of course. I have to ask him when the next rainy season will be.”



After proceeding down the stone pathway for a while, a large shrine came into view. The group was now so far under the ocean that the sunlight was barely penetrating this far down. However, monsters similar to footballfish had started swimming beside the procession halfway through, providing illumination bright enough that their passage was not inconvenienced by darkness. Just like last year, these monsters showed no sign of hostility. Considering Tsubaki seemed to be taking their presence as a matter of course, Sylvia and Ema simply let the monsters be.

Creeeeek.

Due to being at the bottom of the ocean, the wooden shrine was somewhat wet. Tsubaki opened the door to reveal a cave that continued farther down into the ground. The moment the group stepped inside the cave, the torches on the walls came to life with magical flames.

“He’s welcoming you.” Tsubaki chuckled.

Sylvia tilted her head. “Really? This happened the last time we came too.”

“Depending on who I bring with me, he sometimes doesn’t mark the way clearly like this. The cave system here is as complicated as an ant’s nest, making it very easy for someone who does not know better to wander around for the rest of their life.”

Sylvia and Ema looked around. Sure enough, there were passages that were not lit up by torches. In all likelihood, these were all wrong turns that led away from the Water Dragon King’s residence. No monsters had shown up yet, but it wasn’t difficult to imagine that the dragon king had a nasty reception in store for invaders he did not welcome.

Eventually, the passage opened up to a large, spacious area. Tsubaki did a huge stretch and announced, “Here we are!”

The first thing that drew Sylvia’s eyes was a giant underground lake. This place bore a great resemblance to the cavern in Dragon Sea Cave where Kelvin’s party had fought an evil dragon. Here, multiple water dragons who looked similar to said evil dragon swam all around. Any normal adventurer would have screamed at the sight.

“There you are,” a deep voice rumbled. “It has been a while, Sylvia, Ema. It pleases me to see that my descendant is doing well too.”

There was a presence deep within the lake that was overwhelmingly greater than those of the water dragons. There was no way to determine his size or appearance, as he was still beneath the water, but it was clear to all who made it here that he possessed absolute power. This was the guardian dragon of Toraj, the dragon king who served as the master of the element of water.

“I am the Water Dragon King, Fujiwara Torajirou.”



A water drop slid down an icicle on the ceiling and plopped into the lake, causing a splash that reverberated throughout the silent cavern before fading away. The water dragons that had been swimming fell completely silent, giving Sylvia’s group their undivided attention.

“It has been a while, Water Dragon King,” Ema said warmly.

“Mhm. Been a while,” Sylvia added with a small bob of her head.

Of course, the attention was not nearly enough to make these two nervous. They addressed the dragon king in a friendly voice, rejoicing at the reunion. The same went for Tsubaki.

“I’m also glad to see you doing well, my lord,” Tsubaki said. “I’ve been a bit worried, not having seen you aboveground for quite a while. Have you given up assuming human form?”

“Don’t tease me the moment we meet, Tsubaki. You already know my dislike for boisterous places.”

In fact, Tsubaki was so casual with the Water Dragon King that she was ribbing him a little, with her practically treating him like an uncle she was close with.

The sight prompted Ema to ask, “Um, I’ve been wondering for a while now, but Tsubaki-sama, you’re a descendant of the Water Dragon King? That’s what he just called you, right?”

The dragon king started. “Ah, your confusion is likely due to this form of mine. This is actually a closely guarded secret of Toraj, but...” He sent Tsubaki a look as if checking with her.

“Oh, I don’t mind,” she replied. “These two, Sylvia and Ema, have already promised to bring great prosperity to Toraj. A secret or two makes no difference in the grand scheme of things; they would have learned it sooner or later.”

Apparently, it was already a foregone decision in Tsubaki’s mind that Sylvia and Ema would be entering Toraj’s service in the future. Part of her motivation in sharing confidential secrets with them was to ensure that they did not go back on their word.

Ema, the only one of the pair who had caught on to Tsubaki’s intention, started and went, “Huh?” In contrast, Sylvia simply looked on with a figurative question mark above her head.

“Well, where should I start?” Tsubaki said. “Hm...do you two know that it is impossible for a dragon and a human to have children?”

“Ah, Rosalia might have mentioned it before. Something about how dragon blood is too thick.”

“Good, then I don’t have to go into it. It is as that Rosalia person says. And yet here I am, undoubtedly descended from our Dragon God. The reason for this—”

“I was originally human.”

“My lord, I was going to say that!” Tsubaki exclaimed, her cheeks puffed out indignantly.

The dragon king chuckled. “Think of it as payback for just now.”

In isolation, the exchange did sound like something between two humans.

Ema frowned. “Umm...in other words, the Water Dragon King is not actually a dragon but a person?”

“Indeed.” The dragon king nodded.

“Your face is too blue to be human, though,” Sylvia pointed out.

“Oh, I’ve never heard that response before!” Tsubaki exclaimed. “You truly never disappoint, Sylvia!”

Sylvia’s cheeks were dyed slightly red. “You’re making me blush.”

“Sylvia, stop blushing.” Ema sighed. “And Tsubaki-sama, please be serious.”

“And you’re far too serious, Ema,” Tsubaki countered. “But all right, let us continue the conversation. Truth is, our Dragon God is not of this world. He was a human who was spirited to this world from another far, far in the past.”

Summing up what Tsubaki said, Fujiwara Torajirou had been a feudal lord in the world he came from. Despite his young age, he had had quite a few villages in his care. He and his subordinates were involved with agriculture to feed his people, military matters to protect his lands, commerce to create prosperity, and had even arranged regular opportunities to listen to his people’s input. He did all that he could for everyone’s sake. It was a busy life but also a fulfilling one. He took pride in his position and found meaning in what he did.

However, an end came to his time as feudal lord. War broke out. His country lost to a neighbor, and he had to go on the run with a handful of his most trusted retainers. Rain was coming down heavily, so they sought shelter in a nearby forest. It was only a matter of time before they were found. In his world, chopping off the enemy leader’s head was the normal thing to do in war, so being caught was not an option. The sole consolation was that the invading force was not doing all that much plundering. Naturally, the winning side would get to keep the fiefdom and become its new feudal lord, and thankfully, this was a lord who, despite his ferocity on the battlefield, did not mistreat his people. Torajirou himself would still be killed if he was caught, of course, but it was no small consolation knowing that the people he had cared for so painstakingly still had a future.

If the situation came to it, Torajirou was resolved to end his own life. It was the honorable way to die. It sounded a bit ostentatious, but he wanted to keep his pride to the very end and leave the world on his own terms. However, he never got the chance. The rain that soaked him to his bones suddenly ceased and he was bathed in sunlight that should have been hidden behind thick rain clouds.

“Where...is this?”

The view was unfamiliar to him, and the creatures in his vision seemed strange and bizarre. This was the moment Torajirou and his retainers wandered into their new world. Borrowing a phrase from his own culture, he had been spirited away. While on the verge of death, they had found new life.

“And so I founded a new country in this world with my retainers,” the Water Dragon King said in closing. “We wanted to raise it into a great nation, one with the culture of our hometown.”

Tsubaki grinned. “And of course, that was Toraj, the Country of Water. Our Dragon God served as our founding king, expanding our borders with the advanced techniques and unique stratagems from his world. One prominent example in the way of weapons would be our guns. After a lot more development, now we have— Oh, but this is a secret too. Heh heh heh...” She covered her mouth with her open fan and giggled meaningfully. She was doing everything she could to rouse Sylvia’s and Ema’s interest.

Paying no attention to the queen, the Water Dragon King continued, “While bolstering my country’s power, I myself also became stronger. And one day, I found myself having surpassed the limits of a human being.”

“Are you referring to Evolution?” Ema asked.

“Impressive. So you know about Evolution. Could it be that you yourselves— No, I shall not probe.” Torajirou sighed. “Tsubaki is going to talk our ears off if we continue this topic any longer.”

Everyone shot a look at Tsubaki, whose eyes were sparkling far more than before. She was probably reacting to the term “Evolution.” Silently, everyone agreed to pretend not to have seen it.

“When I Evolved, I turned into a dragonkin. The blessing it gave me was this form. As I was still basically a human with the powers of a dragon, I was able to create a child, a boy, with my loved one. After that, I had my fair share of scraps, including beating the previous Water Dragon King in combat.”

By now, Tsubaki had returned to normal. “According to rumors, there are others with dragon blood in their veins, just like me, on the Western Continent. I’ve never met them in person, but I am a living example of the possibility, so I cannot say for sure that they don’t exist.”

“I’m not sure I can comprehend the scale of this story,” Ema murmured, finding herself at a loss for words.

In contrast, Sylvia, who had been listening intently, had the perfect word to summarize what she felt. “Romantic.”

Ema gave her a look, then agreed. “I suppose it is, at that.”

“Now, none of those who came with me remain.” There was a tinge of grief in Torajirou’s voice. “A long life is not necessarily all roses.”

“However, the blood of those founders runs strong in the veins of Torajians. What say you, Sylvia, Ema? Will you work with me to raise this country to even greater heights?”

“Su—”

“STOP! Sylvia, we still have things to do, remember?!”

“Oh, right!”

Ema’s shout brought Sylvia back to her senses. All functional parties had someone with a proper head on their shoulders, and they always had the greatest hardships.

“Ah, so close. Of course, the fastest way to prove that you are a human, my lord, is for you to assume human form.”

“I can just see the scheming in your eyes, Tsubaki. I’ve told you that I’m shy. Exposing my human form is embarrassing!”

“As you two can see, our Dragon God’s personality became a bit twisted after he started cooping himself up in here. His body is still big but he no longer has

any of the fearlessness from when he founded Toraj.”

“I still help out from the shadows when the country is in danger! You may not know this, being born in an era of peace, but I played an enormous role when the Eastern Continent was embroiled in war!”

“Did you now? And is that the same Dragon God who overslept when a gigantic slime that was almost a Demon Lord attacked our nation and the Hero of the time stole the spotlight instead?!”

“Wha— How do you know about that?!” The two started arguing back and forth noisily, the quality of the insults they threw at each other slowly degrading until they were basically just calling each other names like children did.

When she couldn’t stand it any longer, Ema raised her hand tentatively. “Umm...may we talk about why we’re here?”

“Water Dragon King, please open a path through the Waterfall of Heaven and Hell for us,” Sylvia said. “We have to go to Abyssland.”

The arguing stopped as abruptly as it began. The dragon asked, “Why would you... No, I will not ask. It is taboo among you adventurers to pry into each other’s business.”

Tsubaki spoke up. “My lord, I feel like your grasp of this tacit understanding among adventurers is a bit off, but let’s not go into it for the moment. I also wish to ask something of you: please grant this wish of theirs.”

“Hmm, but...” The Water Dragon King closed his eyes and groaned as if deep in thought. “I can tell by your auras that you are strong. Do you truly need my aid to overcome the Waterfall of Heaven and Hell?”

“We will be going with a large group,” Sylvia replied. “We want to lower the risks as much as possible.”

“Even if those companions might turn out to be dead weight on your journey in Abyssland?”

“Not dead weight. They are our strength.”

“I see. In that case...”

“What are— *Aaaagh*!” Tsubaki let out a very un-royal-like scream as she

was suddenly picked up by the Water Dragon King and deposited on his blue head in a way that was similar to suddenly being strapped into a roller coaster.

“Prove your strength by fighting Tsubaki and me! If you insist on bringing those companions of yours no matter the circumstances, I am sure you are capable of overcoming this situation!”

Ema sighed. “I had a feeling it would end up this way.”

Sylvia looked at her in surprise. “Really? You’re so smart, Ema.”

Suddenly being bound to the top of the Water Dragon King’s head left Tsubaki terribly bewildered. The possibility of negotiations breaking down and devolving into a fight had crossed her mind, but she had thought she would get to spectate from a good vantage point. Never did it occur to her that she would be caught up in it and forced to participate.

“M-My lord! You never told me about this!”

“Ha ha ha, if you did not see it coming, then it means you are still naive. You asked to be my successor, did you not? If so, you must be capable of carrying out such responsibilities. Even without that, as the sovereign of a nation, you must at least have the ardor to lead the charge in battle!”

“That’s how they did things when *you* were king! No normal ruler would stand on the front li—”

At that instant, the images of each head of state on the Eastern Continent flashed through Tsubaki’s mind and she found, to her shock, that more of them would be willing to stand on the front lines than she had thought. Beast King Leonhart Gaun habitually strolled into enemy camps all alone as if he belonged there. The newly crowned king of Toraj, Azgrad Trycen, had personally led the force that attacked Parth in the previous war and was well-known throughout the continent as a battle junkie. The only leader who did not show his face in public was Pope Philip Deramilius, but in his heyday, he had been an active member of the party that eventually took down the Demon Lord. Tsubaki was now so flustered that she thought she just might blurt out a swear word or two.

Am I actually in the minority?!

Paying no attention whatsoever to her dazed condition, the Water Dragon

King rose to his full height, whipping up a huge amount of water. In spite of how high he towered, his tail was still hidden underwater, leaving the exact length of his long, blue, serpentine body to the imagination. His form floated in the air, having no trouble staying steady despite not having wings.

“Two against two? So, Tsubaki is also our enemy?”

“That’s not it, Sylvia. The Dragon God told us to overcome this situation if we want to bring everyone else with us to Abyssland. The two of us would be fighting against him and Tsubaki-sama, but Tsubaki-sama is technically more like a hostage. The real challenge being posed to us is to fight in a way that does not hurt Tsubaki-sama.”

“Impressive insight,” the Water Dragon King said appreciatively.

Their companion being held so close to their opponent meant they could not rely on large-scale attacks to secure an approach. What was required of them here was precision and skillfulness. They were fighting the Water Dragon King with a handicap.

“Um, which do we prioritize, defeating the Water Dragon King or protecting Tsubaki?” Sylvia pressed a finger against her lips pensively.

“Our top priority is ensuring that Tsubaki-sama does not die. Don’t hit her, not even once!” Ema replied in a gentle tone, having purposely phrased her answer as simply as possible. This way, there would be no mistakes. Hopefully.

“I don’t want to lose any of my limbs!” Tsubaki cried fervently. Having come back to her senses somewhat, she realized that her current situation was much more precarious than that of a mere spectator. As such, she pleaded one more time for the sanctity of life.

“Hm, okay.” Having been persuaded, Sylvia drew her rapier and stabbed it into the ground. “Wintry Expanse.”

Ice radiated outwards from the rapier, rapidly taking over even the underground lake despite water being under the Water Dragon King’s authority. He was trapped in a huge crevasse that firmly held him in place as the water dragons that had been quietly watching on from a distance raised a ruckus over having gotten caught up as collateral.

Smart move, first seizing the advantage of the terrain, the Water Dragon King thought. This underground lake where he resided was the ultimate home turf for him. He saw that Sylvia understood that and had chosen to counter that advantage in a move that also turned the place into her own territory.

“However, this is insufficient to overturn my advantage! As you now see!”

“Ema!”

“I know!”

The two dove in opposite directions as if they had read each other’s minds. The ice burst upward, showering lumps larger than hail everywhere. From within the explosion of ice and rubble appeared the Water Dragon King’s tail.

“Burning Crackers!” Ema cried, generating a chain of explosions immediately in the path of the tail that had appeared. The dragon king’s power was indeed a threat if it was enough to break Wintry Expanse from within, but Ema understood that she had to bite back her fear if she was to win.

“Hup.” Sylvia, who had been dodging the falling ice, abruptly turned around to close in on the tail and unleash slashes that threaded through the small gaps in between the chained explosions. They parted the sturdy dragon scales, drawing a red line down the length of the appendage. It seemed like there was time for her to deal another attack, but Sylvia chose not to overstay her welcome and swiftly leaped back, putting some distance between them. This was actually the correct decision to make.

KA-BOOOOOOM!

The Water Dragon King’s form stopped hovering and came crashing down. If the slap with his tail just now was powerful, this attack using his entire body was beyond comparison. All the ice created by Wintry Expanse was shattered to bits, converting the environment into a lake with large ice floes on its surface.

Sylvia would have been dead and at the bottom of the lake if she had taken the hit just now. However, she had evaded it and was standing on the water’s surface using Blue Magic. At the same time, Ema landed on an ice floe nearby.

“What destructive power!”

“I’m good at using water too, so, oh well.”

Their reactions were extreme opposites, but they shared an indomitable spirit.

“M-My lord, please let me know in advance when you plan on falling...”
Tsubaki, in contrast, was desperate for this forced roller coaster ride to be over. That said, she was surprisingly unhurt. Ema went, “Oh, uh” for a brief second when she remembered the queen, but then she realized the Water Dragon King would never harm Tsubaki and heaved a sigh of relief.

“So you two are a Magic Swordswoman and a Red Mage, both with exceptional abilities. I commend you for leaving wounds on my body.”

“Aww, shucks.”

“Sylvia, this is no time to be blushing. Incoming.”

The dragon king’s acknowledgment took the form of several waterspouts that began churning the lake water furiously. The water dragons were no longer in sight, having evacuated the moment they were freed from the ice. Before long, the waterspouts reached the cavern’s ceiling, slicing bits of stone from up high that fell down in a barrage. The rain of hail being followed so closely by a rain of stone daggers made Ema worry about the cave’s structural integrity.

Sensing that, the Water Dragon King said, “You need not worry about this place. It is, after all, my personal residence. I am more than familiar with what it can withstand.”

“Thank you for the reassurance!”

Swords clashed, accompanied by explosions and Tsubaki’s screams. The cacophony was hardly pleasant to listen to, but a veteran would be able to glean just how fierce this exchange was from the sound. Or maybe everything was too noisy to tell.

Due to being proficient with both a sword and magic, Sylvia’s fighting style could handle a large variety of situations and was effective regardless of her distance from her opponent. With Ema providing support using Red Magic, the two gradually left more and more wounds on the Water Dragon King’s body. However, none were fatal, and the pair struggled to get much further. They also

had no choice but to avoid all of the dragon king's attacks; the moment they took a hit, their loss would be all but set in stone.

"Sylvia, the longer this goes on, the worse off we'll be. I'm coming up front too."

"You sure?"

"You may be fine, but look at Tsubaki-sama."

"Ah. Okay."

The Queen of Toraj was desperately doing all she could not to repeat the mistake made by a certain Oracle.

"Interesting, a mage joining the vanguard. You have a plan, I imagine?"

"You seem to be under a slight misapprehension, Water Dragon King. Despite my appearance, I'm actually a knight too." Ema reached behind her back and produced a greatsword that glowed with the color of fire and was clad in searing gusts of wind. She grabbed the handle tightly with both hands and gave it a few swings as if to loosen her muscles up. The red blade whistled through the air and evaporated all the water it touched. There was no doubt that it was heated to a staggeringly high temperature. And yet the ice floe she was standing on showed no sign of melting.

It might seem like her control is sloppy at first glance, but that is likely far from the truth. At the same time... The Water Dragon King turned to look at Sylvia and noticed a thin layer of ice creeping over the surface of her rapier. The sight seemed delicate and ephemeral like snow, but the magic behind the phenomenon was wild and violent. When standing side by side, Sylvia and Ema were complete opposites of each other in every way.

The appearance of these swords of fire and ice indicated that the battle was finally beginning in earnest.

"Good, very good. I concede that you are no mere mage. In that case, I should prepare a welcome of my own."

The Water Dragon King opened his mouth wide—not to eat something, but to release a Breath Attack as a sign of his acknowledgment of the two. Water was

drawn away from several of the waterspouts still rampaging throughout the cavern, and it gathered inside the dragon's gaping maw...and then he choked.

"Hot, right?"

The cool line that he said before was completely ruined.

"Why is this water so hot?!"

As it turned out, some of the liquid the Water Dragon King had gathered from the waterspouts was not mere lake water but boiling water. He had failed to notice that due to the protection provided by his sturdy scales and thick skin, but boiling water directly going down his throat was no joke even for the Water Dragon King.

"Tsubaki-sama told us a while ago that you gather the surrounding water when you charge up for your Breath Attack," Ema explained.

"What?! Tsubaki, there you go leaking confidential information again!" the dragon king cried.

"Ha...ha ha... I swear it wasn't because I got too excited about soliciting them for the future of Toraj! It really wa— Urp. Also, there's no rule in this age where a hostage can't give useful info to their rescuer! So please finish this match quickly!"

"All right, all right. Don't say a word more lest it be on my head."

Although he did not clarify what he was worried about, it was clear the Water Dragon King could tell he should put an end to the quarrel and therefore dropped the matter.

By way of further explanation, Sylvia added, "Ema told me to set the trap in one of the waterspouts closest to you." She had secretly cast Geyser Cataract—a spell she had also used in her fight with Kelvin—to generate boiling water inside the core of said waterspout. Just as Ema had predicted, he had completely... Well, he had swallowed it.

"I admit, it did surprise me, but this is nowhere near enough to make me lose. You should have taken advantage of the commotion to land a sneak attack on me with those fancy swords of yours."

“Don’t worry; we’re fakes.”

“What?”

Sylvia’s and Ema’s figures faded as if they were mirages.

“We’re actually...here.”

“What?!”

Sylvia suddenly burst out from another nearby waterspout as Ema leaped down from the ceiling of the cavern. The former’s ice rapier passed by close to the Water Dragon King’s eye socket, leaving magical ice that spread rapidly to seal his sight.

“Ugh!”

“We’ll be taking Tsubaki-sama now!”

At the same time, Ema swooped down to where Tsubaki was and successfully secured her. The queen looked very sick but was otherwise entirely unhurt. As far as hostage rescue missions went, this one could definitely be called a success. It was quite worrying how Tsubaki had both her hands over her mouth, but a success was a success.

“So everything was a setup for this!”

Ema’s plan came down to rescuing Tsubaki while distracting the Water Dragon King with boiling water. Sylvia had hidden herself inside a waterspout and created phantom copies of the two of them with the Rank C Blue Magic spell False Fog. The waterspouts were far more powerful than the Rank S Green Magic spell Tempest Barrier that General Clive of Trycen had once unleashed, but thanks to her Unique Skill, Double Water Armor, Sylvia had remained practically unharmed. This was not a feat that anyone else should attempt to imitate.

Ema, in turn, had been hiding within the cloud of dust near the ceiling, which had been kicked up by all the waterspouts. The pair had exchanged all their communication during battle through eye contact alone, which spoke volumes about how in tune they were with each other.

“Ohhh, Ema! I knew you would pull through for me!”

“My apologies for the wait. Now we can finally use our big attacks. Um, Tsubaki-sama...please don’t throw up, okay?”

“I-Indeed. I shall do what I can.”

“Please do your absolute best.”

The Water Dragon King’s sight would return before long—this was the only chance to evacuate Tsubaki to a safe location. Ema leaped between the ice floes at the fastest speed she thought Tsubaki could stand.

“You sure are strict, Ema. But you know what?”

“What is it, Tsubaki-sama?”

“Never forget that your allies can always betray you.”

“What are y—”

Stab.

Ema heard a sound, then saw Tsubaki seemingly pushing something into her. She lowered her gaze and saw a blood-drenched dagger in the other girl’s hand. Blood was spurting out in a steady trickle from the blade that was now buried deep in Ema’s flank. Without missing a beat, Ema threw Tsubaki away and swung her greatsword.

“Oh, careful with that.” Tsubaki dodged the attack elegantly, her queasiness from earlier gone without a trace. She was even standing directly on the water the way Sylvia did, retreating with swirling dance-like movements.

“Are you okay, Ema?” Sylvia hurried to Ema and stood protectively in front of her while using Blue Magic to generate a thin layer of ice that sealed the wound and stopped the bleeding.

“I’m... I’m okay,” Ema groaned. “Thanks for that. I can’t cauterize the wound because it’ll leave a scar, so I’ll just deal with the pain. If only Ariel were here. No, that’s enough about me.”

Sylvia and Ema looked over and found Tsubaki standing tall, every inch the queen she was, next to the Water Dragon King, who had gotten the ice off his eye. The two pairs faced off against each other.

“What is the meaning of this, Tsubaki-sama?”

“There’s no particular meaning; I’ve also been testing you from the start. I can’t very well allow two people so crucial to Toraj’s future to simply stroll into Abyssland, now can I?” Tsubaki chortled loudly, not seeming apologetic in the slightest.

“You two did well playing that trick on me and saving Tsubaki. However, you lose points for not having considered the possibility of your comrade being controlled by the enemy or being an impostor. These are both common tactics used by those living in Abyssland.”

“I was worried you two might see through my lousy acting the whole time! Ha ha ha!”

Sylvia’s face remained largely expressionless as she admitted, “You got us good.”

Ema, in contrast, looked extremely crushed as she said, “They sure did.” She had not looked this defeated since the time Nagua mocked her cooking skills.

“Well, now, there’s no need to fret so,” Tsubaki said soothingly. “We did not say the test is already over. If you ever learn that you have been deceived, you simply have to break out of the situation that the deception left you in. In other words...”

“We work together to beat you up?”

“First it was my lord, and now you’re interrupting me. Wait, Ema, are you angry?”

“Quite a bit.”

Ema’s red greatsword had been giving off thick billows of steam for a while now, reflecting her emotions. As it turned out, she had a pretty short fuse.

“As one girl to another, can I ask that you not leave any scars on my skin?”

“I shall do what I can.”

“Um, please do your absolute best.”

In spite of her weak protest, however, Tsubaki had a firm grip on a naginata

made of water.



Traces of red and blue flashed in a chaotic mess in the air above the lake. On one side was Ema launching a furious onslaught with her fiery greatsword while on the other was Tsubaki, who, despite the tinge of fright in her eyes, was skillfully parrying everything with her naginata. The two sides flipped between being on the offensive and defensive in quick succession, generating clouds of steam whenever fire met water. Visibility was almost down to zero, but that was a minor inconvenience that did not bother either combatant much. The two glowing colors within the white smoke were showing no sign of stopping.

A few minutes in, Ema, who had been keeping a cool head despite her anger, realized something was off. The pace of the fight had long surpassed that which a normal person could keep up with. Ema herself was as strong as Sylvia, a Rank S adventurer, and yet Tsubaki was fighting toe-to-toe with her.

Despite having obtained supernatural abilities herself, Ema maintained a sharp eye for gauging how strong other people were. She had had opportunities to meet Tsubaki multiple times by now, but not once had she ever felt intimidated by the strength of Tsubaki's aura. Now, however, Ema was feeling it keenly on her skin. Something was afoot.

Was she hiding her strength? That can't be. Tsubaki-sama has the dignity of a monarch, not that of a master martial artist. What's happening, then?

Explosive flames burst from Ema's blade but were promptly canceled out by a huge water cannonball. Tsubaki's control of Blue Magic had reached the same level of mastery as her physical combat prowess. Judging by the composed look on her face, she had it in her to kick things up yet another notch.

CLAAAANG!

Greatsword and naginata clashed, creating a deafening metallic noise that reverberated throughout the cavern and cleared the white fog in a split second. The opponents fell back and stopped moving.

"That's one scary weapon you got there, Ema," Tsubaki said appreciatively. "Any normal weapon that blocks it would be melted in a second. Even I would

be in a tough spot if I wasn't able to parry it with my Suiten no Hitofuri. This naginata constantly repairs itself, you see."

"You don't make it easy either, Tsubaki-sama. You tried to make that naginata of yours phase through my Solforme by turning into water, right? I would have lost a limb if I hadn't evaporated the water in time."

"Heh heh heh."

"Hah hah hah."

The two laughed creepily at each other. Although they were not being very loud, sounds echoed well in this underground cavern. It was so jarring that even Sylvia and the Water Dragon King, who were locked in combat a distance away, looked over.

Eventually, Tsubaki folded. "Fine, fine. I love those who are strong, but I love those who are quick on the uptake even more. You think it strange I have such power, do you not?"

"Well, yes."

"Very well, I'll tell you. Think of it as a reward for entertaining me. Or should I call this an apology for having tried to pull one over on you?"

"Either works."

"Hm, if you say so. I suppose it doesn't matter!" Ema had not asked, but Tsubaki was more than happy to tell. She was clearly in a good mood. "My lord has the ability to share his power with those who have his blood. Long story short, I'm now borrowing part of his strength. And that's how I, a frail, dainty girl, am now a peerless warrior. Like so."

Tsubaki raised her naginata and gathered all the MP in the vicinity. "Dragon's Deluge!"

Water appeared in a giant tsunami with a deep roar, crashing against the walls. The merciless fountain started filling the cavern as if attempting to drown everyone within.

"Ugh!"

"Naturally, this is a Rank S Blue Magic spell. If you don't do something soon

—”

“Froth.”

Sylvia, who had slipped behind Ema by riding a wave, cast a spell that enveloped Ema’s body inside a giant bubble. The water continued churning around her, but she herself remained dry.

“Looks like even that doesn’t stop you two.” Tsubaki turned to the Water Dragon King reproachfully. “My lord, how am I supposed to fight if you don’t control your opponent?”

“All this water you summoned made it easier for Sylvia to move around. Don’t forget that she can use water to her advantage too,” he chided her.

“Mhm.” Sylvia nodded. “I’m good with water too.”

“What about Ema? Water is a bad match for her flames, isn’t it? In any case, the cavern is flooded. I’m curious to see what they do in this underwater world!”

After one last splash, the Water Dragon King’s nest was now entirely submerged. Thanks to Sylvia’s bubble, Ema could still breathe, but the waterspouts from earlier were still going strong, churning the water and creating violent currents. If she accidentally got caught up in any of them, she would have no escape and would be shredded in the blink of an eye, bubble and all.

“Considering my lord will take care of Sylvia, what will you do now, Ema?” Tsubaki appeared before her, looking completely different—instead of legs, the bottom half of her body was a large fish tail. If not for her kimono and naginata, she would have passed for a mermaid.

“Oh, are you curious about this form of mine? Heh heh heh, now I look just like one of our trusted allies, the mermaids. This is another application of the power my lord is giving me. It is not a fish’s tail, but a dragon’s. Only an actual mermaid would be able to tell the difference, though, so there’s no problem.”

“You can speak even while underwater? How fascinating.”

“Oh? You still seem quite composed. Just saying, I’m far stronger in the water

than I was before. Like a fish taking to water, my Agility and fighting skills—”

“Tsubaki-sama,” Ema interrupted the queen, sticking her red, glowing greatsword into the water. Her bubble showed no sign of bursting. “I don’t doubt your strength, but you’re not suited to being a warrior. You speak too much.”

The redness of the greatsword grew in intensity.

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t worry. This will be no more than warm bathwater by Sylvia’s standards. You can think of it as taking a bath.”

“I said— Wait, don’t tell me!” A realization struck Tsubaki, turning her face as green as her tail.

“It’s exactly what you think, Tsubaki-sama. I will now heat this water until all of it evaporates!”

“Stop—”

Ema’s greatsword, Solforme, shone as brightly as the sun as it set all the water in the cavern to boiling.





“Oooh...”

Tsubaki let out a pitiful but cute sound as she lay on the ground of the dried-up cavern with Sylvia, Ema, and the Water Dragon King looking over her. Although her eyes were spinning, she otherwise looked none the worse for wear.

“You surprise me yet again. I expected Tsubaki to be bearing severe burns after being submerged in all that boiling water,” the Water Dragon King mused. “And yet, she’s only unconscious, with no visible injuries.”

Tsubaki’s skin was red, but only to the degree of someone who had been in the bath for a bit too long. The dragon king found it strange that she had gotten away practically unscathed after the disaster she had just been through.

“That’s because of Ema’s Unique Skill, Chains of the Shunned. It—”

“Okay, Sylvia, shush. Don’t go blabbing unnecessarily. Do you want to become like Tsubaki-sama?”

“Uh...being knocked out isn’t fun.”

“As long as you know it.”

Having had an opportunity to vent to her heart’s content, Ema was looking quite refreshed. She flashed a rare full-faced smile while doing a few practice swings with her greatsword. “But are you sure about this, Water Dragon King? We haven’t beaten you black and b— We haven’t beaten you in battle yet.”

“Girlie, you look calm, but you aren’t really, are you? No matter. You two succeeded in saving Tsubaki and took her out of the fight without actually hurting her. You have proven your strength and your bond. As such, I shall open the Waterfall of Heaven and Hell for you. You may go and do what you must with your companions.”

The water dragons from before reappeared out of nowhere and raised their voices in concert, praising Sylvia and Ema in a triumphant warbling that even Tsubaki, the monarch of Toraj, had never heard before.



After successfully overcoming the trial set by Fujiwara Torajirou, the Water Dragon King, Sylvia and Ema rejoined the rest of their party and the Heroes of Deramis. A day later, they arrived at the Waterfall of Heaven and Hell, a giant waterfall of death with roaring water flowing into a seemingly bottomless pit that supposedly served as a path to Abyssland. The group set up base camp in a spot that commanded a great view to rest one last time.

Nagua was currently tending to a pot of pot-au-feu, his best dish, over the campfire, stirring it and taking occasional sips to check its taste. This man, who happened to be the best cook among both Sylvia's and Touya's parties, was the one who was feared by many, especially the mercenaries of his home country, Gaun, as Brutal Beast. However, that past was behind him. Now, his muscular form was clad in a cute apron and he was devoting himself to his cooking with such passion, it was as if this were his new battlefield.

"Hell yeah, this is the bomb! Ha ha, I might've surpassed Master already! Oh, I'm pretty sure I have!"

Just like every other day, Nagua was zealously applying himself to his cooking.

"It's true that your cooking is delicious, Nagua, but you're overselling yourself." Sylvia said, tscking. "My goddess's cooking is in another dimension entirely. But I *am* waiting for the day that you, her disciple, catch up to her. Make sure to keep up your daily training."

Nagua snorted. "Big talk for someone who's drooling a whole-ass waterfall there."

Sylvia, who was staring into the pot with sparkling eyes, replied, "What's delicious is still delicious."

"Okay, Sylvia, let's wipe your mouth, shall we?" Ema reached out with a handkerchief. "But still, Nagua, I can't get over the fact that you decided to call Efil 'Master.' So, you really do acknowledge her."

"Huh?! Don't be stupid! Who would—"

"Did someone just bring up my goddess?" Miyabi interrupted, raising sleepy-looking eyes from a book upon hearing Efil's name.

Nagua ignored her. "It's just that y'all can't cook to save your lives. I'm only

doing it 'cus we don't have a choice!"

"Ugh!" For some reason, Ema, Ariel, and even Miyabi vomited blood and fell over. This was something that happened often.

Setsuna sighed. "Nagua-san, I'm so sorry you have to cook for us too, even though we're practically all girls in our party."

Nagua waved a hand. "Nah, don't worry about it. I've always been doing it for my party. Making a few more portions doesn't make much of a difference. And when I need an extra pair of hands, Kokudori's here too."

"Hah! Thanks for the vote of confidence." Kokudori flashed a grin.

"Nana and I can cook too, but we're only as good as the average person," Setsuna said. "Your cooking, though, is good enough to be served at a restaurant, Nagua-san!"

"What, uh... Oh, shut it. Y'all! Food's ready! You can at least serve yourselves, yeah?"

Ema noticed Nagua blushing as she wiped the blood away from her mouth. Since he almost never got praised, the beastkin had trouble honestly accepting it when Setsuna's group expressed their appreciation.

"Okay, I'll do the serving!" Ariel, who was the first to recover, reached for the ladle. However, Nagua immediately grabbed her hand.

"Nagua?!" The hand contact sent Ariel's heartbeat shooting up as if this were a scene from a young girl's manga.

"Are you serious, Ariel? Are you trying to kill us all?!"

"Huh?"

Unfortunately, reality was cruel. What came out of Nagua's mouth was not a declaration of love but a cry of alarm. Cooking was the only thing that Ema and Sylvia were hopeless at, but Ariel was beyond help in all aspects of homemaking. The group had thought it a curse and brought her to a famous cleric in the past, but the cleric had confirmed that she was not afflicted by anything. Sadly, Ariel's "homebreaking" abilities were just part of who she was.

Meanwhile, the Heroes all thought, *Why did he stop her?* But that was

because they were completely in the dark. Thanks to the efforts of the other members of Ariel's party, no major incidents had occurred yet.

When Ariel saw how good Efil, a fellow elf, was at housework, she had felt motivated to improve by working on it. However, her efforts always ended up bringing disaster on her party members, so they always made sure to stop her, completing this negative spiral.

"By the way, why'd you two go alone to see the dragon king?" Nagua asked, trying to change the mood upon realizing he may have been a bit too direct in the way he had stopped Ariel just now. The attempt was rather awkward and unnatural, but this was the best that this usually tactless man could manage.

"The Water Dragon King's quite shy, so he wouldn't meet a large group," Ema replied. "Tsubaki-sama aside, he only ever meets at most two people at once."

"Pity. I wanted to meet him too," Kokudori said. "If I remember right, you two also saw him when you were traveling by yourselves. And that's also when he gave you the Blessing of the Water Dragon King?"

Sylvia nodded absentmindedly. "Mhm, yep."

"What?! You have a dragon king's blessing?! Tell me the story!" Nana exclaimed.

"I'm pretty interested too," Setsuna added.

Nagua's cleverness had paid off, with the conversation now having taken off in a different direction. Even Ariel joined in, allowing everyone else to heave a sigh of relief.

Sylvia explained, "Apparently, I look similar to his wife when she was young, and he felt really moved—"

"WHAT IS THAT OLD DRAGON LEERING AT YOU FOR?!" Nagua roared in a flash of rage, his wild instincts awakening.

This time, it was Nagua who had to be stopped, and Ema and Kokudori did their best with exasperated looks on their faces. Setsuna watched the scene while doling out servings of pot-au-feu, feeling a sense of sympathy.

"Nagua-san, I brought the firewood you asked for. Look at how much I got!"

Touya announced, coming back to camp with the worst possible timing.

“YOU DIE TOO!”

“Why’d you say such a terrible thing?!”

Before the situation spiraled any further out of control, Kokudori clinched a sleeper hold on Nagua from behind as Ema drove a fist into his abdomen. Ariel stood nearby, preparing Healing Magic in a fluster as Miyabi just watched things unfold while enjoying her bowl of stew.

Suddenly, Sylvia burst into giggles. Ema, who was about to throw a second punch, stopped to look at her.

“Sylvia?”

“We’re like Kelvin’s group now. It’s so noisy, but I love it. I wonder if Kelvin’s reached the teleportation gate yet. Or is he already on the other side?”

“Who knows?” Ema felt her chest flush with warmth at seeing her usually expressionless friend’s smile. Then she threw her punch at Nagua.





There were teleportation gates in Abyssland that formed pairs with those aboveground. One stood deep in a desert called Boundless Poison, a place where purple, poisonous sand stretched as far as the eye could see. Ferocious, powerful monsters with resistance to deadly poison roamed this land while two suns—there were suns here even though it was supposed to be underground—beat down mercilessly. However, there were oases too, and the teleportation gate was located in one. The protective barrier surrounding it also contained a natural spring, providing a relatively pleasant environment.

“The time is nigh!”

A voice reverberated throughout the oasis. Several demons were gathered in front of the gate, facing a thousand monsters standing in ranks, waiting impatiently for orders.

“I’m sure everyone’s heard the rumor of the feeble Demon Lord of the overworld having been killed. Well, our independent investigation confirms that this rumor is true!”

Thunderous cheering rose from all those gathered. There was a large variety of screams, ranging from unintelligent garbling to simple broken phrases.

“Mua ha ha. It is said that traveling to this gate is supposed to be a trial, but not for us thanks to our race’s high resistance to poison! So we get to trample the peace-addled fools aboveground! Soon, I will have the power of a Demon Lord myself!”

“ROOOAAAARRR!”

The group, gathered before the teleportation gate, had come from a country in Abyssland. It was considered taboo in Abyssland to mess with the overworld teleportation gates due to the number of Demon Lords who had been killed by Heroes in the past. However, the severity of such lessons had a tendency to fade in the minds of people over time, until someone eventually came along who thought themselves too cool for the rules. This time, this group was it. They were *just* about to violate the taboo and invade the overworld.

“Vanguard, forward!”

Obeying their officer's command, a group composed primarily of medium-sized monsters filed through the teleportation gate.

"Commander, how do you think our expedition will go?" the vice commander asked his superior while watching the troops marching on.

"What do you mean?"

"We have no idea what the place is like on the other side of this gate. According to rumors, there are two gates, and depending on the one we come out of—"

"Ha ha ha! Don't worry. We have already surpassed the trial. In other words, we have been deemed worthy. We are worthy of seizing everything in the overworld!"

"I see now!"

"Mua ha ha, gotta thank our home country for making this call. All right, Squad 2, in you go!"

The monsters that had been thoroughly trained to listen to orders continued shuffling through in turn as the commander barked orders in a great mood.



Just as we were in the middle of helping ourselves to the Flame Dragon King's treasure, grotesque monsters with purple skin started coming through the teleportation gate. Since this gate was supposedly connected to Abyssland, it was immediately obvious that we were getting visitors from the other side. They yelled in a language I didn't understand and had faces that I couldn't read. In fact, they seemed to match the description of demons that Gerard had once given me—what's more, there were a lot of them.

"Gaaaaaah! Gsh gsh gsh!"

The moment the monsters laid eyes on us, they pounced, making weird, disgusting noises. They were like wild beasts starved to the point of losing their minds. Despite having been caught off guard, we pulled ourselves together and fought back.

To think they would come to us of their own accord! Let's enjoy this welcome

party of denizens of the land of my dreams!

“Well, that’s what I thought at first, but...”

I was so excited that I had jumped out to be the first to engage the monsters, but my enthusiasm began cooling as I killed one, then two, then more of them. In the end, I was ice cold. And who could blame me? These monsters were ridiculously weak.

My companions had leaped forward to join the fight at the start, but they gradually began dropping out one by one. Even without talking about it, we had concluded that all of us getting involved was overkill. In the end, the only ones left fighting were the youngest and weakest member of our party, Shutola, and the member who had Evolved into a dragon king recently, Mdo, currently in her blue form. Shutola was fighting as battle practice, whereas Mdo was using it as an opportunity to get used to her human form. I wanted Boga to join in too, but he was still Evolving inside my magic pool.

“Dearest brother, dearest sisters, any good ones this time?”

“Nah.”

After annihilating the group of demons that had just emerged from the gate, Shutola turned to where I was perched on top of the mountain of treasure, watching over her like a parent at a school sports meet. It wasn’t as if I had nothing to do, of course. I was using Analyze Eye on the enemies she had just killed while Sera did the same with her nearly precognitive instincts and Ange, a master in such matters thanks to her unparalleled detection abilities, did a final check. We were looking out for any demons that were particularly dangerous. It was the least we could do since Shutola was doing all the fighting. And if we didn’t, the overprotective grandpa would make a huge ruckus.

“Ah, Kel-nii, the next wave’s coming through.”

“Seriously? Oh no. Whatever will we do? If the demons that come through are any stronger, we would be so screwed.”

“Aha hah, can you at least not sound so monotone?”

I couldn’t be serious with my acting because I had stopped expecting anything. As a battle junkie who appreciated reason and logic, I was making

sure that I properly jinxed the situation.

But still, it would just be sad if this ends with nothing but cannon fodder coming through. Do better, land of my dreams! Is this all you've got?!

Another group came through the gate, making unintelligible *Gsh gsh gsh!* noises.

Shutola stayed vigilant as Mdo asked, "How is it, my liege?"

Hmm, they're all purple again. All right, here goes. Analyze Eye, activate.

"More duds." I sighed.

"This group's no good!" Sera agreed.

The last judge, Ange, also said, "Yeah, we struck out again."

I knew it.

"I see." Shutola leaped onto Georgios and deployed her threads and golems. "Okay, then. Mdofarak, let's do this!"

"Understood." Mdo raised finger guns with both hands and aimed them at our enemies.

Shutola manipulated her twenty golems like a grandmaster attacking a chess problem. The golems all moved separately, with some using their Gatling guns to mow down the demons, some using shields defensively, and some using spears to keep the enemies at bay. Every single movement seemed intentional and strategic, conveying a genius mind bent on finishing the fight in the most efficient way by getting the most done with the smallest number of moves. Just like the previous rounds, this one was going to be over without Georgios even having to get involved. I possessed Parallel Thought, which increased the capacity of my mental calculation, but even I could not kill everything in such a clean way.

As for Mdo and her strange pose, I hadn't the faintest idea what had influenced it. Perhaps she had found something from the massive bank of knowledge inside my mind through the Network. In any case, she had decided to adopt the finger guns pose when doing her sniping in human form. Living up to her title as Light Dragon King, she was shooting bullets of water and ice from

her finger in a way that made them look like lasers. These bullets were easily more devastating than those fired by the golems' Gatling guns, and she could even shoot them in rapid succession. She had a hundred percent accuracy at this distance, making it seem like she was using actual guns. As an aside, what she could shoot differed based on her current personality—for example, she fired flamethrowers when she was Red Mdo. At the end of the day, however, a Breath Attack from her mouth was the most powerful and accurate option, but that was still a secret.

With Shutola and Mdo working together, it took almost no time to wipe out the demons coming through. The corpses gradually got in the way, so I had Clotho swallow the pile every so often and, if they had nothing valuable, simply Absorb them all. When the place was clean again, our two intrepid fighters then simply waited for the next wave.

“That’s it! Go for it! I’m with you both!” Gerard cheered from the background.

“How many has it been now? I’m feeling peckish from all the waiting,” Mel murmured.

I shrugged. “I stopped counting after a hundred. It’s starting to look like all they have is numbers.”

To be honest, we’re too overleveled for a force of mainly Rank B monsters. If I remember correctly, lesser demons are also Rank B, right? Maybe archdemons like Viktor are rare even in hell. No, I’ve got to change how I think about this. These guys are the starter mobs in Abyssland. They’re the slimes that’re just wandering about close to the teleportation gate. In other words, they’re the mascot mobs that even residents of the starter town can defeat if they try hard. Yep, that would explain these numbers.

“But nah, they’re too ugly to be mascots.”

“I’ve no idea where your imagination has taken you, Kelvin-kun, but I’ve got good news for you.” My fellow evaluator, Ange, grinned at me as the cat ears part of her hood twitched slightly. “The next enemy to appear from the teleportation gate will be quite different from all the others so far.”

“Really?!”

“Yep, really.”

Well done, Ange! Tomorrow, you may aim for my neck anytime you want! As for you, demons: welcome!

“Hmph, so this is the overworld. It’s gloomier than I expected. And look at these unfortunate overworld denizens. I almost feel sorry for you. You may curse your fate for being here today, though of course, even if you weren’t, you wouldn’t have lived all that much longer anyway.”

“Huh? Um, my lord, I don’t see the forces that we sent ahead.”

Ange was right, this demon is wearing much nicer clothing and speaking like he’s a big shot. His companion seems to be at a loss for some reason, but I couldn’t care less right now. Analyze Eye, let’s go!

“Okay, this guy is...iffy.” I shot Ange a look.

“Dud again!” Sera declared.

“I mean, they’re not weak, but...” Ange scratched her cheek awkwardly.

“Yeah, I don’t know what to say either.”

This isn’t what you promised!

“I didn’t lie.”

“That might be true, but this isn’t quite...” *These guys are stronger than the previous ones by only one micron, if at all.*

Seeing our reaction, the self-important demon guffawed. “Mua ha ha! Look! These fools are frozen with fear at seeing me! What’s more, those who went ahead left them alone, thinking they were too weak to deal with! Did they forget my command to enslave everyone in the overworld? I’ll have to punish them later!”

“I see! So that’s what happened!” the other demon exclaimed.

I think they’re seriously misunderstanding, but meh, don’t really care. I sighed. “They at least seem intelligent enough for speech, so let’s wring them for all the info they have on the terrain surrounding the gate. Sera, you’re up.”

“They’re just duds, though. You sure?”

“Yeah, go for it.”



“So, this is Abyssland, the land where the Apostles’ base is,” I murmured.

On the other side of the teleportation gate was sand, sand, and more sand. Put simply, it was a desert. Two suns hung in the sky, emanating scorching rays without mercy. In a way, being deposited in a desert after making our way through a boiling volcano was just mean. To make matters worse, the sand was as purple as the skin of the demons from just now, making it clear it was poisonous.

“Whoo, I’m back home!” Sera whooped.

“Home sweet home, baby!” Dahak joined in.

Huh? Oh, right. I knew Sera was born here, as she’s a demon and everything, but I forgot it’s the same for Dahak. Totally slipped my mind. Dahak’s dad is the Darkness Dragon King, right? I’ve heard the children of great people have a higher possibility of becoming delinquents, and Dahak’s probably one such example. His dad wants him to carry on his title, but Dahak is only interested in things like gardening. This led to the relationship between them turning sour. I’ve no intention of butting into my party members’ personal lives, but if he ever asks me for advice, I’ll probably suggest he and his dad have a conversation with their fists. Honestly, most problems can be resolved that way.

“Earth Dragon King, I can’t wait to show you how much I’ve grown!”

Wait, that’s your first thought? Not that I have a problem with it.

“So, where is this place in Abyssland?” I asked the self-important demon Sera had used Blood Dominion on earlier.

“Explain!” Sera commanded.

The man, who had been standing to attention behind her, marched forward and saluted sharply. “Yes, ma’am! This desert is called Boundless Poison! It is a place that many people say many things about—some call it a taboo land meant to prevent anyone from heading to the overworld, some call it a testing ground to prove their strength, and so on. The monsters here are at least as strong as I

am and extremely poisonous! Of course, the sand of this desert is also poisonous!”

“I see. If the monsters are only about as strong as you, then I guess there’s no point in us going out of our way to hunt them down when they’re so weak.”

“My apologies for failing to meet your expectations, sir!”

“Huh? Oh, nah, don’t worry about it. By the way, how’d you get such a large force through this supposedly poisonous desert filled with monsters maybe stronger than you? Isn’t this land really harsh?”

“Those in our bloodline are born with a strong resistance to poison! We relied on that ability and also chose the path through the desert that’s relatively not as poisonous. Poisonous monsters also avoid those areas—”

“Sera, make him go back to being on standby,” I said, in response to which Sera clapped her hands once, making the demon go, “Shutting up now, sir!”

Blood Dominion was indeed extremely useful in drawing information out of targets, but for some reason, it made all of them talk really loudly. Apparently, Sera liked them that way—even now, she was nodding at the demon with satisfaction.

“Looks like there’s a barrier around the gate on this side too,” Rion commented. “It’s not as hot as what I imagine a desert to be.”

“There are signs of a camp here,” Efil added. “There is water within the barrier too, so perhaps this area is generally safe.”

Just as they said, we were in what looked like an oasis surrounded by a barrier. The effect of the barrier was very likely the same as the one on the Fiery Mouth of Purgatory side. All the signs of camping were definitely from the demons just now—it was one huge mess.

Having both the commanding demon and his subordinate come along would just slow us down, so should we leave the commander behind to clean the place up?

“Heh heh, I know what everyone’s getting at: it’s snack time, right?”

“Snacks?!”

“It’s not, though. Mel, you just ate. And Mdo, don’t react to everything she’s saying. You wanna become like her?”

“Uh-oh...”

“Mdofarak, is there something wrong with becoming like me? Hm?”

“I said nothing.”

After placating Mel, I made all the necessary preparations for crossing the desert, such as having Mdo switch to her red personality. We had the vice commander demon under Sera’s control to show us the way, so there was no fear of getting lost. Our first destination would naturally be a settlement where people—as in, demons—lived. There were demons who looked entirely humanoid, such as Estoria, so we would probably not draw any suspicion. Demons apparently didn’t care much about appearance due to how different they could look.

“All right, before we head out, I’m gonna go over our goals one last time,” I said, prompting a chorus of enthusiastic okays.

First, we wanted to visit Sera’s birthplace. To that end, we would be heading to the country that had once been ruled by Demon Lord Gustav. This was meant as more of a grave visit, so it didn’t matter what the country’s current state was. There was a lot that I had to share with Gustav at his grave. He would probably have one or two—or a lot more—choice words for me if he really was as much of a doting father as I’d heard, but it was my place to take it all. If he had been alive, he probably would have been throwing punches at me before words, and I was a bit conflicted over whether to feel relieved or regretful about that.

Next, we were looking to dismantle the organization of the Apostles. Not much explanation was needed for that goal. We would defeat Iris Deramilius, Serge Flore, and the eight remaining Apostles, and stop Elearis from being resurrected. All for the sake of this wonderful world, of course!

“My king...drool. You’re drooling.”

Whoops, I let my true self out for a split second there. Let’s have Efil wipe it away with a handkerchief.

“Please hold still. Okay, all clean.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re not much better than I am, my liege.”

“I know. I’m aware.”

However, this is an incurable condition. I have to live with it for the rest of my life. So stop looking at me with those sympathetic eyes, Melfina. You and I are not the same. Stop it with that face of understanding! Enough! I’m steering the conversation back!

Our last goal was to help Sylvia’s search for Sister Ellen, who was supposedly somewhere here in Abyssland. This was more of a side thing for us, but because we had agreed to do it as adventurers, we would of course give it our all alongside everything else we had going on. Otherwise, we wouldn’t be able to face Sylvia.

“Sister Ellen is Sylvia and Ema’s adoptive mother and their teacher in both swordsmanship and magic. If she’s really that talented, she’s definitely made waves where she is, even if she didn’t intend to. Her appearance is up on the Network, so please check it, everyone.”

“Oh wow, her long, silver hair makes her look like Sylvia’s actual mom. It’s the same shade,” Rion commented.

“I see what you mean,” I agreed. “But there’s a chance she’s capable of changing her hair color just like Estoria did. Sister Ellen might think she threw off her pursuers by coming to Abyssland, but she might still be disguised. Keep that in mind.”

The moment we found her, we would be contacting the Heroes of Deramis through the pendants I’d given them. Depending on the nun’s situation, we might immediately take action to bring her under our care. The reason she had given for disappearing was to recuperate from a disease, but there was no way to know for sure without hearing it from her own mouth. I could only hope the real reason was one that would satisfy Sylvia and Ema.

Okay, I think we’re all on the same page. How’re things going on Sera’s side?

“Repeat what I just said!” Sera barked.

“Yes, ma’am! After cleaning up this entire area, I’m to charge into Boundless Poison by myself!”

“Good! Carry out this last mission of your life with all you have!”

“Yes, ma’am! I will clean the place, leaving no stone untouched!”

Ah, she’s just finished up too. Well then, off into the desert of hell we go!

Afterword

Thank you so much for purchasing *Black Summoner 9: The True Champion*. It's Doufu Mayoi here, the author who's slowly getting on in years. Thank you so much to all the readers who are still following this series as it moves from web novel to printed pages. Your purchase means the world to me.

This time, I only have one page for my afterword! How troubling! What should I write about?! Oh right, the cover. Let's talk about the illustration on the cover a little bit!

This is the ninth volume, and we finally see our gluttonous goddess heroine, Melfina, gracing the cover. I really wanted to see her next to Colette. Doing so is to ignore the wishes of one and to grant the wishes of another, but as the author, I couldn't help but settle on this order of volume cover appearances. Given how religiously zealous she is, I'm sure Colette appreciates it very much. Look at that! I actually said something cool in an afterword for once! Okay, that's a wrap!

Lastly, in regard to the actual production of this volume of *Black Summoner*, I want to express my thanks to DaiXt-sama for drawing Melfina so divinely, Kurogin-sama, my proofreaders, and of course, once more, all my dear readers.

With that, I hereby leave *Black Summoner* in everyone's warm hands, praying that we will meet again next volume.

Doufu Mayoi

■ KELVIN CELSIUS

■ 23 Y/O / MALE / DAEMON/ SUMMONER

■ LEVEL: 138

■ TITLE: GRIM REAPER

■ HP: 2,270/2,270

■ MP: 21,456/21,456 (+14,304)

SUMMONING CLOTHO: MAX MP -100

SUMMONING GERARD: MAX MP -1,000

SUMMONING SERA: MAX MP -1,000

SUMMONING MEL (ARTIFICIAL BODY):
MAX MP -5

SUMMONING ALEX: MAX MP -?

SUMMONING DAHAK: MAX MP -500

SUMMONING BOGA: MAX MP -?

SUMMONING MDOFARAK: MAX MP -1,200

■ STRENGTH: 1,420 (+640)

■ ENDURANCE: 1,249 (+640)

■ AGILITY: 1,631

■ MAGIC: 3,184 (+640)

■ LUCK: 2,107

■ EQUIPMENT

BLACK STAFF OF DISASTER (RANK S) MAD HOLY SWORD CLIVE (RANK S)

BLACK SWORD AKLAMA (RANK S) SKILL EATER (RANK S)

ASTARTE'S EMBRACE (RANK S) BLOOD PENDANT (RANK S)

GODDESS'S RING (RANK S) BLACK LEATHER BOOTS OF THE DIVINE
BEAST (RANK S)

■ SKILLS

MAGIC OVERCLOCK (UNIQUE SKILL)

SWORD MASTERY (RANK S)

SCYTHE MASTERY (RANK S)

GREEN MAGIC (RANK S)

ANALYZE EYE (RANK S)

PRESENCE SENSING (RANK A)

DANGER DETECTION (RANK A)

MAGIC DETECTION (RANK A)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)

NERVES OF STEEL (RANK A)

ARMY COMMAND (RANK S)

HERCULEAN STRENGTH (RANK S)

MAGIC ENHANCEMENT (RANK S)

DOUBLE GROWTH RATE

EXPERIENCE SHARING

PARALLEL PROCESSING (UNIQUE SKILL)

COMBAT TECHNIQUE (RANK S)

SUMMONING (RANK S)

[AVAILABLE SLOTS: 2]

WHITE MAGIC (RANK S)

FLIGHT (RANK A)

DANGER DETECTION (RANK A)

MIND'S EYE (RANK S)

DISGUISE (RANK S)

SMITHING (RANK S)

SPIRIT (RANK S)

IRON WALL (RANK S)

DOUBLE EXPERIENCE POINTS

DOUBLE SKILL POINTS

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

BLESSING OF THE GODDESS OF REINCARNATION DISGUISE (RANK S)

SKILL EATER (RIGHT)/GLUTTONY (UNIQUE SKILL)

SKILL EATER (LEFT)/DUAL WIELD (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ EFIL

■ 16 Y/O / FEMALE / HIGH ELF / BATTLE MAID

■ LEVEL: 137

■ TITLE: BOMBING PRINCESS

■ HP: 1,277 / 1,277

■ MP: 4,069 / 4,069

■ STRENGTH: 590

■ ENDURANCE: 579

■ AGILITY: 3,773 (+640)

■ MAGIC: 3,002 (+640)

■ LUCK: 1,892 (+1,604)

■ EQUIPMENT

PENUMBRA (RANK S)

MERCILESS (RANK S)

BATTLE MAID UNIFORM V (RANK S)

BATTLE MAID HEADRESS V (RANK S)

GLITTERING MAGICAL JEWEL HAIR CLIP (RANK A)

BLESSED SLAVE COLLAR (RANK A)

GODDESS'S RING (RANK S)

LEATHER BOOTS OF THE FLAME DRAGON KING (RANK A)

■ SKILLS

BLUE FLAME (UNIQUE SKILL)

ARCHERY (RANK S)

RED MAGIC (RANK S)

COVERT ACTION (RANK S)

SERVICE (RANK S)

COOKING (RANK S)

SEWING (RANK S)

ACUTE REFLEXES (RANK S)

DOUBLE GROWTH RATE

DOUBLE SKILL POINTS

DIVINE RESTITUTION (UNIQUE SKILL)

COMBAT TECHNIQUE (RANK B)

FARSIGHT (RANK S)

DEMAND DETECTION (RANK S)

TEACHING (RANK S)

MASSAGE (RANK S)

DISCERNMENT (RANK S)

CLEANING (RANK S)

MAGIC ENHANCEMENT (RANK S)

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

BLESSING OF THE FLAME DRAGON KING

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ MEL (ARTIFICIAL BODY)

■ 17 Y/O / FEMALE / ANGEL / VALKYRIE

■ LEVEL: 138

■ TITLE: THE SMILE

■ HP: 4,099~4,760 (+3,678~4,339)

■ MP: 4,099~4,760 (+3,678~4,339)

■ STRENGTH: 4,099~4,760 (+3,961~4,622)

■ ENDURANCE: 4,099~4,760 (+3,961~4,622)

■ AGILITY: 4,099~4,760 (+3,961~4,622)

■ MAGIC: 4,099~4,760 (+3,961~4,622)

■ LUCK: 4,099~4,760 (+3,961~4,622)

■ EQUIPMENT

HOLY LANCE LUMINARY (RANK S)

VALKYRIE MAIL (RANK S)

VALKYRIE HELM (RANK S)

GODDESS'S RING (RANK S)

ENGAGEMENT RING (RANK S)

REINFORCED ETHER GREAVES (RANK S)

■ SKILLS

DIVINE BINDING (HIDDEN SKILL)

SYMPATHETIC RESONANCE (UNIQUE SKILL)

SPEAR MASTERY (RANK S)

BLUE MAGIC (RANK S)

WHITE MAGIC (RANK S)

FLIGHT (RANK S)

MIND'S EYE (RANK S)

NERVES OF STEEL (RANK S)

SERVICE (RANK S)

MAGIC CONSERVATION (RANK S)

ACCESSORY CRAFTSMANSHIP (RANK S)

ALCHEMY (RANK S)

HEARTY EATING (RANK S)

STEEL STOMACH (RANK S)

DIGEST (RANK S)

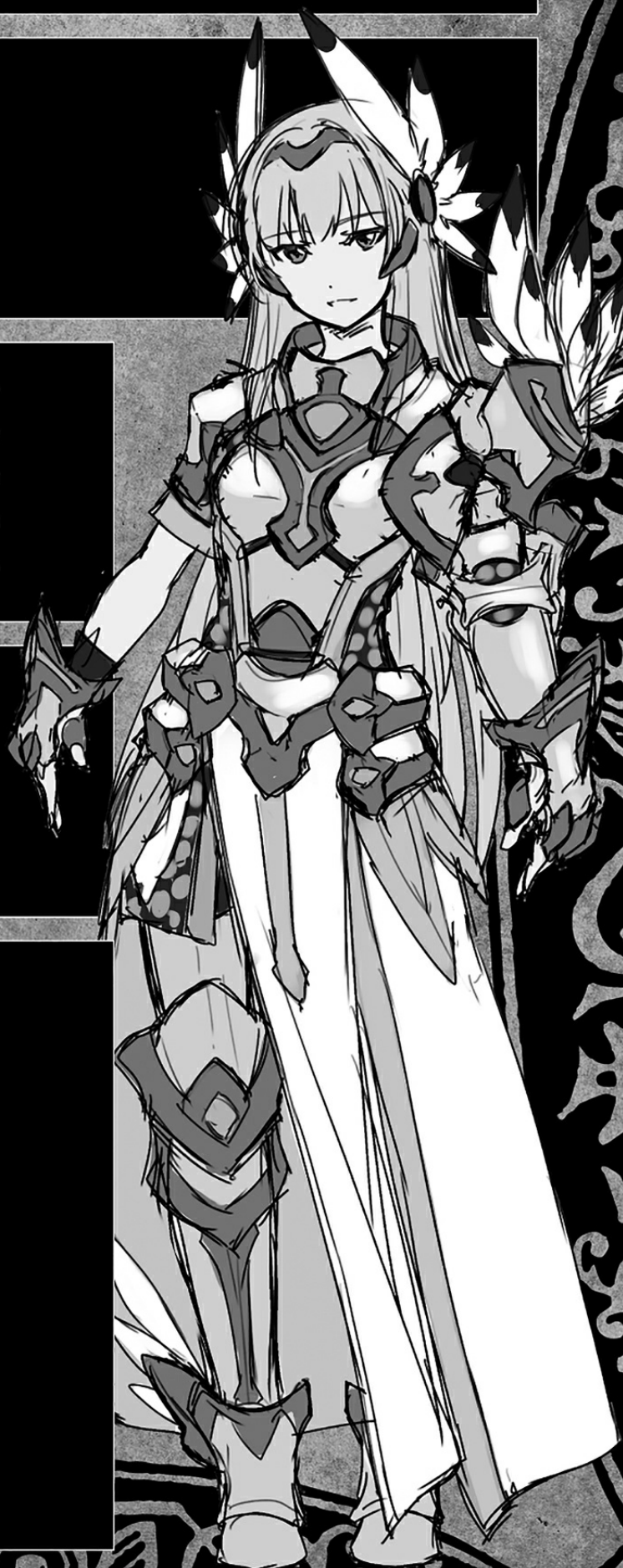
GUSTATION (RANK S)

OLFACTION (RANK S)

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

SUMMONING/MAGIC SUPPLY (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ SERGE FLORE

■ ? Y/O (You really shouldn't ask a girl her age. That said, I'm always 17 at heart. Like, really!)

/ FEMALE / SAINT / HERO

■ LEVEL: Probs the highest in the world. Yay for #1!

■ TITLE: PROTECTOR

■ HP: Not as tanky as Survivor. 'Cus I'm a Saint.

■ MP: I should probably take notes from how intensely Reviver wants things.

■ STRENGTH: What do you think seeing the thin arms I have?

■ ENDURANCE: My mental fortitude is like tofu, so please be kind.

■ AGILITY: Probs lower than Assassin's. Totes sad.

■ MAGIC: It's nothing compared to Arbitrator's.

■ LUCK: The only thing I'm super confident in! But whether it works how I want it to is another issue entirely.

■ EQUIPMENT

HOLY SWORD WILL (RANK S)

GOD HAND IERO (RANK S)

HEAVENLY GARMENT MITOS (RANK S)

ETERNAL BOOTS ZAGE (RANK S)

■ SKILLS

ABSOLUTE GOSPEL (UNIQUE SKILL)

□ □ □ □ J □ □ □ □ □ □ (UNIQUE SKILL)

□ □ THER □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ (UNIQUE SKILL)

SWORD MASTERY (RANK S)
(ABRIDGED)

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

□ □ □ □ □

□ □ □ □ □

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)

DISGUISE (RANK S)



Bonus Short Stories

Gerard Objects to His King

One common thing that adventurers did after completing a quest was relieve their fatigue from the day with a mug or two at the tavern, deepening their ties with their companions. Every once in a while, Kelvin and Gerard would do the same at their favorite establishment, the Fairy's Song. Today was one such day; they were knocking tankards together in a corner of Clare's inn.

"Things went great today. I thought Shutola's movements were a lot better than usual! How did it look to you, Gerard?"

"Hardly needs to be said! She performed perfectly. Just perfectly. As expected of my grandchild!" The dark knight took a few hearty gulps. Even though his face was hidden behind a helmet, anyone could tell he was in high spirits.

"There you go again. Don't you think you dote on the girls a bit too much?"

"I can't let that slide, my king! You make it sound like I'm a sweet, lovable, overly doting grandpa! Oh, were you complimenting me?"

"I definitely wasn't," Kelvin said bluntly, waving a hand in dismissal.

"In that case, my king, if we're going there, I have an objection to make too!"

"What're you objecting to?"

"It's true I dote on my grandchildren. However, so do you, my king! Are you not self-aware?"

"Me? Go easy? You joke. Of course that's—"

"Then answer me this! If Ruka asked to ride on your shoulders or sit on your lap, how would you answer her?"

Without hesitating in the slightest, Kelvin declared, "I'd let her do both! While holding back tears of joy!"

“Next, what if—though I don’t think she would—Shutola begged you to buy something expensive?”

“It’ll be a present! If Shutola asks for it, I’m sure it’s necessary for our family!” This answer also came instantly.

“And lastly, if you’re eating with Rion outside in a public place and she says she wants to feed you or be fed by you, what would you do?”

“I’ll do what she asks with the biggest smile!” Kelvin did not even have to think twice.

“That was fast... Wouldn’t you feel embarrassed doing such things in front of other people?”

“Hmph! I’m impervious to embarrassment thanks to Efil! But...secretly, I guess I would be a little bit embarrassed!”

“All right, verification over. I hardly need to spell this out, my king, but you also dote on the girls far too much!”

“Oh my god, you’re right! But, grrr, it pains me to hear it from you, of all people!”

“How could you say that?!”

The tie between these two deepened again—or maybe not—today.

Everyone’s Beloved Sister Ria

Today, Kelvin decided to drop by the Deramisian capital and visit Lifil Orphanage with Melfina and Colette. However, not only did they not give the orphanage advance notice, they were sneaking into the grounds using techniques they had learned from Ange.

“Mel-sama, Kelvin-sama, why are we doing this? Please don’t get me wrong, being able to do something with the two of you brings me so much joy that I’m absolutely above the clouds right now, even though inhaling your noble fragrances in such close proximity with my sensitive nose has me five seconds away from a nosebleed.”

“Don’t go leaving such obvious evidence behind!” Mel whispered in alarm.
“Hold it in!”

“U-Understood! Ah, so my faith is being tested again!” Colette clapped both her hands over her nose.

Melfina gave Colette a look. “That doesn’t sound very reassuring, but I am still choosing to trust you. Now, as for what we are here to do. Put simply, we are here to check that the former Aspotle, Estoria, has properly reverted to her alternate persona.”

“We’re just worried about how she’s doing,” Kelvin added. “We’ve threatened her plenty, we’ve put contingency plans in place, and Sera’s given her stamp of approval, but at the end of the day, nothing beats checking up in person.”

“So that’s how it is! Not only is it important to have the benevolence to forgive someone’s transgressions, it is also important to maintain a broad vision and pay attention to details. I feel various things about to burst from within me when I think about how much consideration the two of you have for everyone!”

“I told you to hold it in!” Mel hissed.

Despite the ruckus these infiltrators were making, they continued undetected thanks to the orphanage’s children being their usual lively and boisterous selves.

“Now then, where is Sister Ria?” Kelvin murmured.

The group crawled through the grass, sneaked along walls, and passed through the attic, charting a course through all the places currently devoid of humans in search of Ria. There was no need for any of this effort, of course, as Kelvin already knew her position through Presence Sensing, but it was part and parcel of the mission.

Eventually, the group found their target. Kelvin announced in a documentary narrator’s voice, “It is just about noon. It turns out the children and nuns of the orphanage were gathered in the dining hall to have lunch.”

“What wonderful commentary, Kelvin-sama!” Colette gushed.

“You two, shhh!” Melfina placed a finger on her lips, then looked down. “Ria... There she is!”

The goddess, saint, and Grim Reaper all peeked through the hole they had opened in the ceiling. The situation was dire. As in, the saintess’s breathing was growing very erratic from how much she had been holding herself back.

“Ria, you’re not eating that?! Then it’s mine!”

“Whaaaat?! I was saving it for last because it’s my favorite! Please give it baaack!”

The weir— The saint’s eyes registered Ria enjoying her lunch with the children. The nun was properly maintaining her Ria persona as she was supposed to, and all seemed normal.

Kelvin nodded. “Okay, nothing’s out of the ordinary.”

“Looks like she’s doing well,” Melfina confirmed.

“Um, I’m terribly sorry, but...I think I won’t be well very soon.”

Kelvin and Melfina exchanged a look, then the former hoisted Colette up and swiftly left the peaceful orphanage before it was drowned in a sea of blood.

Heart-Thumping Girls’ Talk

After celebrating their reunion, young Shutola, Lunoir, and Ashley moved on to talking about the past over light finger food, telling stories of moments they had shared as friends and staunch companions. Some of these ended up being quite novel to Shutola due to her memory loss, but Lunoir and Ashley always patiently took her through what happened. Prior to this, Shutola had been worried about how well she would be able to talk with them, but those fears were unfounded. Now, she was enjoying their time together from the bottom of her heart. The group never once struggled to find a conversational topic.

“Now, how about we do a bit of the obligatory girls’ talk?!”

“Wha— Ashley!”

“What does that mean, Ashley? We’re girls and we’ve been talking this whole

time, haven't we?"

"Lunoir, even Shutola got my meaning despite her new young age. You're all grown up, so why didn't you?!"

"Um, still no idea what you mean. Do you understand, Shutola?"

"Um, uh, sort of...maybe?"

"Interesting. So you *do* know what I'm talking about, Shutola?"

"Argh, Ashley!"

"Ha ha ha! Sorry, sorry. So, Lunoir, 'girls' talk' doesn't mean chatting like we were doing. No, it specifically refers to asking each other questions about our love lives, teasing each other about our answers, and having fun talking about topics that we can only bring up when there are no guys around!" Ashley slammed the table and leaped to her feet in a burst of emotion. She looked so excited that someone familiar with her usual cool demeanor would be surprised if they saw her now.

"What's happened, Ashley? Are you feeling ill from eating something bad?"

"Ugh, Lunoir, don't give me that weird look. I'm a girl too, so of course I'd want to talk about this kind of thing every once in a while. I can't when Kokudori's around, Ariel is so obvious there's no point asking her, and Nagua's a blockhead and an idiot!"

Ashley was basically just name-calling by the end. Shutola ignored that, however, and simply nodded. "Ah, I understand wanting to be seen as a girl. Ashley, you are a girl!"

"Thank you, Shutolaaaa! Okay then, let's start with you. Because honestly, Lunoir and I have nothing to talk about!"

"Mhm, we're too busy looking for mother."

"I...feel like I just got tricked. Am I imagining it?"

"You're totally imagining it!" Ashley replied in a singsong voice. She had indeed been trying to steer the conversation to this topic from the very start, but only because she wanted to close the distance with Shutola.

“Be honest with us. How are things between you and Kelvin-san? You’re living with him now, right?”

“Dearest brother Kelvin and me? I’m...not sure, I think? I don’t really know what love feels like in the first pla— Oh! I do love grandpa Gerard, though!”

“I’m not asking about the love between a grandparent and grandchild! Do you like Kelvin-san as a guy?”

“Whaaat? In that case, um...thinking about it, I’ve never really liked a boy in the way you’re talking about. At least, I don’t think I have? Yeah, I don’t think I get that whole thing.”

“Oh? That’s not a direct denial. Very suspicious.”

“Lunoir! Don’t— I just said I don’t get it!”

For some reason, Lunoir was very perceptive today. Ashley, who was sitting next to her, wondered why Lunoir’s perceptiveness never kicked in when it came to Nagua. She found herself feeling a bit bad for Brutal Beast.

“Of course, when Shutola feels like it, I’m sure she will be able to slowly draw the noose around him even without Teacher Efil finding out. Gosh, how frightening.”

“Did you say something, Ashley?”

“Oh, nope, nothing!”

It was entirely up to this Golden Sage whether what Ashley feared would happen or not in the future.

The Mermaid Queen’s Miscalculation

The Queen of Toraj, Tsubaki Fujiwara, had a hobby that she had never shared with anyone else: she loved swimming as fast as she could in a private pool in her palace. This sounded entirely normal on paper. Swimming was a rather common hobby, and there was even a beautiful beach close to the palace, entirely open for such activities.

There was, of course, a reason Tsubaki had to hide her passion.

“Oh, wait, I don’t actually need to breathe, but I always end up doing it out of habit. Still, swimming in this form really is the best!”

Put simply, Tsubaki was in the form of a mermaid. She was having the time of her life, enjoying blasting through the water, having put all regal dignity aside for the moment. When the Water Dragon King lent her his power, her stats were boosted to the point where she could fight on equal footing with a Rank S adventurer. And it was only human to want to enjoy the feel of using such power to its full potential. Tsubaki was no exception to this temptation, and her swimming sessions were her way of expressing it.

“Why is my lord so stingy about lending me his power? How amazing would it be if I could use it whenever and wherever I wanted? No matter. It is my policy to take advantage of chances when they present themselves. Now then, Kelvin’s group is scheduled to arrive this afternoon. There is still time before then. Let me end with some diving!”

With a splash, Tsubaki disappeared deep into the pool that had been specially made for her. It was incredibly large and so deep that even light barely reached the bottom. Tsubaki loved swimming fast, but she also loved simply floating in this world devoid of sound and light, letting the water carry her with its flow.

Suddenly, she heard a familiar goddess shouting very demonic lines.

“Honeeeey! I smell a fresh fish in this direction! It’s super large and very rare! I’m sure it’s in this room! This one!”

A bubble of air burst from Tsubaki’s mouth in surprise. The goddess in question was, of course, Mel, from Kelvin’s party. Being as smart as she was, Tsubaki immediately understood that Mel had her sights locked on the queen herself as a meal.

“What’s with that unnecessarily sensitive nose of yours? Come on, stop wandering around willy-nilly! We gotta first say hi to Tsubaki-sama. Look how troubled our guide is!”

“But honey, a fish this big means LOTS of sashimi! Oh, just remembering the naatu sashimi that Efil made once is making me drool...”

“Okay, okay, we’ll ask Tsubaki-sama to let us borrow her kitchen again. But

we still have to greet her first! That's common sense! Especially because we arrived earlier than we said we would. This is no time for pit stops."

"Fiiiiish! My fresh fiiiiish!"

Mel's voice gradually receded into the distance as Kelvin dragged her away by the back of her neck. Tsubaki had apparently dodged a bullet. Her secret was safe.

She chuckled in relief. "Ha ha, there goes Kelvin again, helping me out without even knowing it. I knew it; he really is worthy of serving me."

Unbeknownst to Kelvin, Tsubaki's evaluation of him had gone up another notch.

Mdofarak's Super Personal Struggle

For some, mornings at the Celsius residence began early. For example, Efil had to prepare breakfast and help Kelvin with his morning routine, the rest of the maids had to do whatever was needed around the large house with its many residents, and Gerard and a few others had morning training agendas. All in all, everyone—except a certain goddess—was eager to make the most of the time they had each day. Even Mdofarak, who had Evolved into the Light Dragon King, was no exception. She had taken up helping Dahak with his farming every day.

Since she could now command a variety of elements, watering Dahak's plants was child's play for Mdofarak. She reverted to dragon form, raised all three heads to the sky, and sprayed just the right amount of water. The rapid pace at which the expansive field was being doused proved just how masterful she had become at this task.

"Okay, that'll do!" Dahak called up to his fellow dragon's towering form. "Thanks for watering everything so skillfully, Mdofarak! You're a great help!"

All three heads replied in unison, "I worked hard again this morning. Super looking forward to sister Efil's breakfast."

"I, uh, was thinking the same thing. Man, it's gonna take time getting used to talking to you in that form. It's so weird hearing three voices speaking

simultaneously.”

“You should get used to it sooner rather than later. Becoming a dragon king requires the magnanimity to accept anything, and you’re sorely lacking there.”

“All of you punks getting full of yourselves just for becoming dragon king first! Yeah, yeah, I get it. Go ahead and grab breakfast. I’ll come after I put everything away.”

“Very well. Work hard, young one.”

“You’re younger than me!”

After this daily exchange, Mdo turned into her red-haired human form and headed for the dining hall.

“Good morning, sister Efil. Breakfast, please.”

“Good morning to you too, Mdo-chan. Please take a seat and give me a moment. I’ll bring it out freshly made.”

“Understood. What is today’s menu?”

“Eggs Benedict. I know you want lots of honey on yours, right?”

“Honey-topped eggs Benedict?!” Mdo gasped in shock. That was one of her favorite dishes. Even after Efil disappeared into the kitchen, she remained extremely flustered, though one would be hard-pressed to tell from her expressionless face.

Who’d have thought I’d get to have my favorite dish for breakfast today?! What good fortune! Wait, but should I eat this at my own discretion? Should I not consult Blue and Yellow? They don’t know yet because they’re sleeping, but they’ll definitely make a fuss when they wake up. But if I tell them, the chance of me eating this or the portion I get to have will go down to a third!

When Mdofarak was in human form, only one of her personalities was awake at any given time. This was no problem in terms of nutrition, as they shared the same body and therefore it did not matter which personality was doing the eating. But they also shared memories, and Red Mdo was sure that Blue Mdo and Yellow Mdo would pick a fight with her afterwards for eating on her own. This was why Red Mdo was now torn between whether to be forthright and

consult the others or be shrewd and keep it to herself.

“Thank you for waiting, Mdo-chan. I thought you’d eat a lot, so I prepared three portions. Will you be able to eat all of it?”

“Sister Efil, you really are my goddess.”

“What was that?”

Mdofarak swore in her heart to follow Efil forever and ever.

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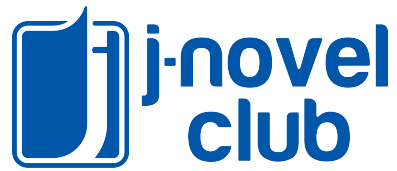
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Black Summoner: Volume 9

by Doufu Mayoi

Translated by Taishi Edited by Tess Nanavati

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Original Japanese edition published in 2019 by OVERLAP, Inc.

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Ebook edition 1.0: June 2022